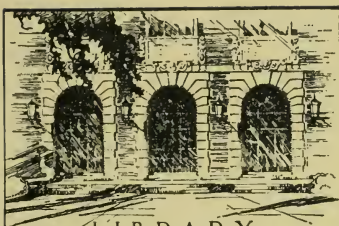


CLAIRE BRANDON

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A NOVEL

BY

FREDERICK MARSHALL

AUTHOR OF 'FRENCH HOME-LIFE,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. II.

WILLIAM BLACKWOOD AND SONS

EDINBURGH AND LONDON

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CLAIRE BRANDON.

CHAPTER XI.

NEXT morning they all met on the flags before the Kurhaus, and walked up and down, with glasses of water in their hands, amidst the crowd.

Madame de Rochedure seized hold of Claire, and presented about five-and-twenty men to her in ten minutes. They were of many nationalities. They were all making simultaneous love to "the French Marquise," as they called her. All of them had sore throats. Amongst them was a Danish count who had smoked too many cigarettes; an Italian colonel who had shouted too furiously to his men; a Russian general who had been frozen in Turkestan; a Turkish effendi who had

vainly tried to learn to sing, and had damaged his vocal cords in the process; a Spanish secretary of legation who had been stabbed through the neck at Lima; three German officers in various stages of consumption; and a Portuguese who had made a fortune in Brazil, and had therefore got himself made a viscount, but who had to pay for both by chronic laryngitis, brought on by living for twenty years on an exceptionally dusty coffee plantation.

Not one of them interested Claire, and she was not sorry when her aunt had finished her ration of water, and they were able to go to breakfast. Madame de Rochedure and three men were at the next table, and made, between them, such a tremendous noise that Harriet Brandon remarked they were not giving their throats much chance of cure.

After a stroll in the gardens, everybody sat down in the gallery, and then Madame de Rochedure took up the talk and kept it. She began by a long outbreak against German food, and after she had exhausted that, addressed herself to Claire and cried, "But you English are worse off still. British cookery is the vilest in the world. I have tried it in its native

horror. It is not merely barbaric, it is savage. It is the sort of cookery one would expect to hear of on a newly discovered coral-reef."

"Perfect, Marquise! Admirable! Delightful!" broke in the Russian general.

"Its soups are lotions; its sauces are ointments; its roasts are brute flesh; its vegetables—oh, its vegetables!—are water-meadows."

"Famos! Famos! Famos!" exclaimed the three German officers, in three different tones, one after the other.

"It is illiterate, uncouth, and meaningless. It is both peppery and insipid; both tallowy and sodden; both ponderous and poor. Its object—if, indeed, it has any object at all—is to satisfy the coarsest and most unworthy passions of the appetite. It appeals to no educated tastes; it inspires no delicate ambitions; it awakens no elevated aspirations."

"Beauteous! Smart!" cried the Portuguese viscount, desiring to outdo the others by speaking what he supposed to be English.

"There is not in its composition one sentiment of grace. It does not contain a thought. Imagine cookery without a thought! It is a national dishonour. Of what use is it

to you to have lost the battle of Hastings, to have produced Isaac Newton, and to have suppressed the slave trade—if you cannot cook?”

“Delicious, Marquise! Delicious! Delicious!” shrieked all the adoring gentlemen at once.

“And what makes the matter worse—lamentably worse—is that your food itself, before it is ungratefully destroyed by cruel treatment, is extraordinarily meritorious. The meat presents aromas that are unknown to dwellers on the Continent; the fish is full of oceanic freshnesses which are discoverable in no other land; the fruit is redolent of special fragrances; the vegetables have the bloom of flowers.”

“Poem! Idyl!” gasped the Dane, joining his hands in ecstasy.

“If we French possessed such raw material as that, our feeding would supply the grandest known example of the proper use of things.”

And then Madame de Rochedure was forced to stop to cough, and all the men clapped their hands with enthusiasm.

“She is really very amusing,” whispered Countess Hohenwalden to Claire. “She did

not make the same impression on me last night."

"And very clever, too," was the reply. "Her nonsense is poured out with such rapidity, such ease, such brightness, that, in the whirlwind, it sounds almost like sense. Her tremendous volubility is astonishing. And yet she finishes every sentence she begins."

"There are not five other women in Europe who do that," observed Countess Hohenwalden.

"I fancy," continued Claire, "she possesses something of the old French facility, altered to fit the appetites of the present. I hardly heard her speak while we were in Paris. If I had, I might have formed a rather higher idea of the capacities of the place."

In the afternoon Countess Hohenwalden and Madame de Rochedure found themselves together for a while.

The latter said: "That English girl—who, after all, is more Continental than English—interests me. She was a good deal admired in Paris, even after it was discovered she had no money—which proves what an honest race we are. Madame d'Hérystal brought her out."

"Madame d'Hérystal? The Marquise

d'Héristal?" asked Countess Hohenwalden, with interest. "She is a very old acquaintance of mine. So—she introduced this young lady in Paris?"

"Yes, and spoke of her with an affection, an admiration, and an esteem that produced a real effect. I fancy no one will ever talk of me in that way." And for an instant Madame de Rochedure looked strangely sad. But she went on again at once: "I shall try to become friends with her—if she will have me—though she inspires me with a certain awe. She did in Paris. I am not at all sure we shall get on together."

"She thinks you very clever," said the Countess. "She told me so this morning."

"Clever! That is not what I want her to feel about me. But I will try. Why . . . here she comes. Do look, madame, at her head. Did you ever, in all your experience of heads, see one put on like that? She carries it as if it were the glory of an empire . . . Well, mademoiselle, alone?"

"Yes; my aunt is tired, and is lying down—so I came out for a stroll along the river. What are your plans?"

"I must go and drink my water," said Countess Hohenwalden.

And Claire and Madame de Rochedure walked on together.

To the surprise of Claire, Madame de Rochedure did not speak. She looked straight before her, and seemed to be thinking.

After a while, Claire said, "You are by yourself here?"

"By myself? Well, yes. Why do you ask?"

"Is it not rather . . . uncomfortable, to be alone in a hotel?"

"Uncomfortable! My dear, I thought you knew a good deal of life. Madame d'Hérystal told me you did. Surely you are aware, then, that marriage is a condition which frequently obliges wives to be alone in hotels."

Claire could not help laughing, though she saw that Madame de Rochedure was very grave. She answered—"My impression was that, on the contrary, marriage is a condition in which husbands usually accompany their wives to hotels."

"Oh, not my husband; nor a good many more that I could enumerate. My husband and I find that it is satisfying to both of us

to go different ways, whenever we get an opportunity. I have come here, and M. de Rochedure has gone to . . . well, I don't know where. As we never write to each other, we do not need addresses."

And Claire saw there were tears in her eyes.

"I will tell you all about it some day—that is, if you will let me. I feel a sympathy for you that I have never experienced before. I am certain I can trust you. Only, I am afraid of boring you."

"Boring me! Pray do not say that. It is such a privilege to try to lessen sadnesses. If you have any I will do my utmost to help you to bear them. I will indeed. I have sadnesses myself, and I can talk about them to no one—not to one soul; my own heart is my sole confidant. I know how hard that is. So talk to me if you will. You will find that, as you say, you can trust me," and she took the hand of Madame de Rochedure.

"You tempt me. And yet it is ridiculous to pour out my soul to you, a stranger. But then I am quite mad, and do absurd things, like nobody else—though I am not at all a fool. There is something in you, something

which draws me on and forces me to speak to you. And I have sudden moments of unbearable distress—and this is one of them. Sit down on that bench. Oh, may I tell you? . . . Well, here is my story . . . in twenty words . . . You are sure you will forgive me? . . . I feel that it must come out to you . . . My father made a great fortune in trade. My mother died. I was the only child. I was taught the usual things, and as I was sharp, I learnt them, which is more than happens with most children. Then my father, who was a well-meaning man, but ambitious, bought a Marquis for me, and I was told he was my husband. And the Marquis had debts, and bad habits, and bad acquaintances, and a bad temper. With all that it happened that I had an affectionate nature, and that I went into marriage to love my husband. Instead of that I found myself face to face with failure—monstrous, disgraceful failure. And now you understand why I am alone in that hotel?”

“I understand.”

“Then understand, also, why it is I talk so wildly. I live in an unceasing effort to intoxi-

cate myself by the sound of my own voice. I commit all the follies that are within the reach of an honest woman. I am exaggerated in everything—for instance, in telling you all this. It runs away with me. And yet I am a frightful impostor. The world supposes that I overflow with joy ! Oh, the world ! Well, now, what does your science say to all that ?”

“It is a bad case. But I can prescribe a remedy. Will.”

“Will ! What is will ? In your use of it, I mean.”

“Will is doing your duty, steadily, but without exaggeration.”

“Without exaggeration ? Then do not recommend the process to me. If I ceased to exaggerate, I should expire.”

“What is your name ?” asked Claire.

“Jeanne Larins was my name before I married. Since I have drifted into my present ways, I have been known, in my set, as Toc Toc. Call me Jeanne.”

“Well, Jeanne, it is beyond my skill to undertake to be a doctor of souls. But, nevertheless, I can safely recommend my medicine—will, for I have had occasion to try it my-

self, and have found that its curative power is amazing. Whatever be your troubles they may be diminished by will. Be sure of that."

"Yes, I daresay," replied Madame de Rochedure, returning to her ordinary manner. "But as will is an offspring of common-sense, and as I have no common-sense whatever, I do not see how I can engender will. Besides, now that I think about it, I am not sure that, after all, I want to be cured."

"Then do not consult a doctor."

Madame de Rochedure described herself correctly when she said she was exaggerated, and as not really wanting to be cured. Next day her twenty-five adorers were making love to her as if she had never spoken to Claire. She half forgot, indeed, that she had done so, and passed the morning in a particularly developed passage of tenderness with the Russian. After lunch she took up one of the Germans. All this disgusted Claire, who went off in another direction, and sat working with her aunt and Princess Mohileff.

In answer to an observation from Claire about Countess Hohenwalden, the Princess

said, "Yes, she is a singularly striking and sympathetic woman. But she has one peculiarity which is not pleasing. Her conviction of the value of birth in general, and of her own birth in particular, and the shape in which she expresses that conviction, are sometimes decidedly disagreeable. I have heard people find excuse for her by saying that she is mad on the subject. That is said so often. Of course all the Austrians attach to birth an importance which is not attributed to it, in the same degree at least, in any other country; but Countess Hohenwalden goes far beyond any Austrian I have met. To be 'born' is, in her eyes, the one divine privilege."

"Then, now I understand," put in Claire, "a look—a look of astounding pride—that I have seen pass across her face."

"That look," replied the Princess, smiling, "is known to every acquaintance she makes. She is not mistress of it, and lets it out, unconsciously, about three times a-day. Otherwise, she is delightful and full of all sorts of real merits."

"What a pity," exclaimed Harriet Brandon, "that such a woman should have such a weak-

ness! It is very satisfactory to be 'born'; but there are other worths in life besides high birth."

"Not in Austria," interrupted Princess Mohileff. "When you go there you will see. In Austria, those who are 'born' consider that they have achieved the one object of existence. To be 'capable of court,' which results from being 'born,' is the all, the whole, the end. It is a society in which, as you know, 'mankind begins at barons.' Countess Hohenwalden is a very intense example of the consequences. But judge her gently, for, in all else, she is a very admirable woman. You are sure to hear her theories. She is always talking of them. I warn you that they are somewhat startling."

Later in the afternoon Countess Hohenwalden came out and joined them. She said to Harriet Brandon, "I find you know Madame d'Hérystal. She is an old acquaintance of mine."

"Oh, do you know her?" cried Claire. "I am so glad! She is our dearest friend."

"I got into relations with her," continued the Countess, "when my husband was secre-

tary of Embassy in Paris, thirty years ago. She was very brilliant then. I have seen her often since, and like her much. Her brother, too, is charming. We met him first at Brussels, where we were colleagues together; and when we were transferred to Paris, we found him there at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs."

"How small the world is!" put in Harriet Brandon.

"Well, yes, for cosmopolitans like us," said Princess Mohileff. "We go about and make friends everywhere, and then say the earth is little. But to others, who are not such vagabonds as we are, it remains, I fancy, a mournful mob, in which nobody knows anybody else."

"I am so pleased, so immensely pleased," went on Claire. "It is such a joy to hear our friends spoken of with sympathy. I write constantly to Madame d'Hérystal, and will tell her in my next letter that you have mentioned her to me."

And then the conversation was interrupted by the impetuous arrival of Madame de Rochedure and her following, who came up laughing and talking loudly.

“Countess,” said Madame de Rochedure, “we have had a turbulent dispute. Of course I am certain I am right—I always am ; but, all the same, I should like to be supported by your opinion. I said, quite accidentally, that prejudice is contemptible ; and, behold, everybody attacked me, and protested that prejudice is a respectable condition of mind. I am sure you agree with me that it is not. Pray, say so. I shall be so pleased.”

“Really, I cannot,” answered Countess Hohenwalden. “I have much respect for prejudice—not abstractly in itself, but as a singularly solid form of conviction. Having strong convictions myself, I am unable to despise any of the shapes which conviction can assume. No ; I do not agree with you that prejudice is contemptible.”

“Why, if it is conviction at all—which I deny—it is conviction based on ignorance,” cried Madame de Rochedure, vehemently. “And what is there to respect in ignorance ? Prejudice is the contrary of reason and experience ; it springs from habit only ; it repudiates all evidence ; it is blindness pretending that it can see. And in addition to all that, it is of

necessity a merely local product ; by its nature it cannot be universal ; it believes one thing in one place and another in another, according to the influences that create it. No, madame, I assert that it *is* contemptible."

Countess Hohenwalden raised her eyebrows, and stared at Madame de Rochedure. But the latter could not be stopped. She dashed on again—

"Look, for instance, at the prejudice of birth. What is there to respect in such an accident as that? And . . ."

"Birth an accident, madame?" broke in Countess Hohenwalden, pale with anger. "Birth a prejudice? Birth an accident? I cannot . . ."

"But let me explain," urged Madame de Rochedure, perceiving from the rather anxious faces round her that the conversation was taking a dangerous shape.

"No, no ; it is my turn, if you please, to explain. You appealed to my judgment. You have stated your views. Let me state mine. I say that birth is the very grandest of exalted rights, the most infinitely noble of all conceivable privileges. I say that it gives to those

who own it an individual part in history. It makes of each of them a link in time. I say that it bestows on them a place and an action in the transmission of fame from the past to the future. It stands alone, apart, above all human attributes. It lifts us up before ourselves even higher than it places us before mankind, for it alone can teach us our true responsibilities. Without birth, madame, neither man nor woman can comprehend honour. Honour, honour known, honour lived, is as much an exclusive consequence of birth as breath of life. There is on earth but one single sentiment which is utterly noble, a sentiment which is capable of leading us to actions so high that they are unapproachable by any other road: that sentiment is the consciousness of the blood within us. Birth an accident!"

And the look of boundless pride came back into her face, and she gazed with it, relentlessly, almost inhumanly, at Madame de Rochedure.

The group around remained in awkward silence. Each member of it felt that, as usually happens in disputes, there was right

and wrong on both sides. But neither right nor wrong could remove the unpleasantness of the scene.

Madame de Rochedure put an end to it herself. She was violent and frivolous, but she had generous qualities. She recognised in her heart that she had been excessive and discourteous. She hesitated for an instant, and then said, with a frank smile, "Forgive me, madame. I have said too much. I forget sometimes that others have as great a right as I to an opinion ; and you, madame, have very special rights to an opinion on this question."

Countess Hohenwalden did not move. The offence was, in her eyes, too grave for pardon. She remained silent.

Madame de Rochedure waited a few seconds for a reply to the excuses she had offered ; but finding that none came, she said carelessly, "Who is going to the theatre to-night ? Will anybody take a place for me ?"

Every man present cried, "I will."

And then Countess Hohenwalden rose, observing, "It is time for me to drink my water."

She smiled to Princess Mohileff and the Brandons, bowed coldly to the others, and walked slowly and grandly away.

“Well, she, at all events, knows what prejudice is,” observed the Russian, hoping to please Madame de Rochedure by the remark.

“I think,” answered Claire, “that you use a wrong word, General. The feeling which animates Madame de Hohenwalden cannot assuredly be called prejudice. It is conviction, absolute conviction, based on the accumulated sentiments of sixty years. We may or we may not agree with her, but it seems to me that it is neither exact nor just to describe her opinions about birth as prejudice.”

“You are altogether right, Claire,” exclaimed Madame de Rochedure. “Madame de Hohenwalden is of very noble race, and no one but a madcap like me would have attacked birth in her presence. It was bad taste, too, and I am sorry I did it. Still, when I frankly said so to her, I think it would have been nice of her to have answered me in the same spirit, instead of turning her back upon me as she did.”

Claire thought so too, but she said nothing.

At dinner, Countess Hohenwalden joined the Brandons. She referred at once to what had happened in the afternoon. She explained that faith in birth was a religion to her; that she believed in blood, just as she believed in God; and went on to say that she was certain the Brandons held the same opinion as herself.

As this was put by her in a somewhat interrogative form, Harriet Brandon replied, "The same opinion—yes, in principle. Certainly we hold the same opinion; but not in the same form, or with the same intensity as you do. We regard birth as an advantage, as an honour, and as a responsibility; but never have we admitted—and never shall we admit—that it possesses all the qualities which you attributed to it to-day."

"And yet, if I mistake not, you have ancestors yourselves?"

"Certainly we have ancestors. The Brandons of Hurley have lived for five centuries on the same estate."

"Five centuries! Hum! That is something. It is even, in England, a good deal; for, generally, your genealogies are not what

we call ancient. And many of your so-called old families are not noble ; which is incomprehensible. I examined your lists of titles when I was in London, and I found that the most antique only dates from somewhere about the end of the thirteenth century. Why, we in Austria can show descents which are hundreds of years older than that, and many of us belong to former reigning families. I think, then, it is natural we should attribute to our lineage an importance which, I regret to see, you do not attach to yours."

" Are the Hohenwaldens extremely ancient?" inquired Claire.

The flush of pride dashed instantly into the face of Countess Hohenwalden. She looked illumined—almost, indeed, inspired—and she answered, in a voice which grew in power and excitement as she went on, "I will tell you our story, mademoiselle, and you shall judge.

" The Hohenwaldens were Lords of Marburg at the beginning of the tenth century. They were Counts of the Marches of Carinthia in 1120. They were Counts of the Empire in 1190. The head of the house was appointed Hereditary Grand Wolf-Hunter of the Duchies

of Austria when the charge was created in 1284. The head of the house has held the charge ever since. The Hohenwaldens have given three cardinals to the Church, two Grand Masters to the Order of Rhodes and Malta, and three to the Teutonic Order. They have fought, for a thousand years, on every battlefield in Europe. 'High' was their war-cry in the dark ages. When heraldry was invented the motto they took was 'High.' High stands the glory of their name in history. It is, indeed, an honour and a privilege to bear it.

"For my own family I can say almost as much. It is less ancient than the Hohenwaldens, but it has filled a front place in Austria. The Teplitz date from the beginning of the thirteenth century, when they became known as Barons of Herg. They were made Princes of the Empire at the first creation of non-reigning princes under Rudolph II. The branch to which I belong was formed in 1616, when an ancestor of mine married the heiress of the last Count of Zeditz.

"Between the Hohenwaldens and the Teplitz we represent more than two hundred shields of arms, for there is not one single

family of great note in Central Europe to which we have not been, at some period or other, allied by marriage.

“ With such a past behind us we regard the unsullied transmission of our name to posterity as the very highest of our duties.”

And as she spoke these last words her voice trembled with triumph, and her expression of pride became almost frightful in its intensity.

A short silence followed. The enthusiasm of Countess Hohenwalden had been so ungovernable, her manner of expressing it had been so impassioned, that the Brandons—notwithstanding the difference of their opinions—had listened to her with an emotion they could not suppress.

At last Claire spoke. She said, “ Indeed, madame, you have strong motives for your convictions.”

The winning smile came back to the Countess; her gracious dignity returned; she answered, “ I thought I should convince you. Let me indulge the hope that I shall not only convince you, but convert you, and that before we part, I shall have the satisfaction of leading you both to see as I see, to

judge as I judge, and to attribute its true value to the old blood within you. How strange it is that, with five centuries behind you—which, after all, do constitute an ancestry—you should not be noble !”

Harriet Brandon turned her eyes away and bit her lip. This allusion to the “ old blood ” of Claire jarred painfully upon her, and awoke her once more, roughly, to the realities and the dangers of the position. It happened, fortunately, that Claire was watching Countess Hohenwalden, and did not observe the change in the expression of her aunt. The latter mastered it and went on talking ; but her heart was saddened, and she used the pretext of a headache to go up to her room.

This time the impression on her had not been caused by fear of revelation of the secret, but by an entirely new and abrupt perception of the possible effects of what had happened on the attitude which certain persons might adopt towards Claire. Although Harriet Brandon had made up her mind to conceal the declaration of illegitimacy from Claire, she had become convinced, all the same, that it would do no harm to Claire’s position. She was

quite assured that, in England, it would be regarded, generally, under all the circumstances, as of small importance. Mrs Gordon and Madame Valona had even given her to understand that it would produce no results at all there. Madame d'Hérystal, a very experienced woman, had expressed analogous opinions as regarded France. But she suddenly recognised, from the language of Countess Hohenwalden, that there were people elsewhere who might, on the contrary, be disposed to show wounding slights to Claire if the truth were known to them. Of course, Countess Hohenwalden was only a passing acquaintance; but she was a member of the cosmopolitan society in which the Brandons liked to live; she had friends all over Europe; she had a high position and exercised considerable influence; and furthermore, she was a very admirable old lady, whose sympathy and esteem Claire might well be proud to win. And yet it seemed probable, from her entire tone, that illegitimacy would be a bar to her goodwill. It was only a probability, and it was a probability limited (so far) to a fanatic on questions of birth; but if that fanatic

learned the truth and changed her manner towards Claire, others might do the same. The eventuality, remote though it was, opened up a new cause of anxiety and a fresh source of pain. Harriet Brandon felt that night that the chain she was dragging after her was augmenting in weight.

CHAPTER XII.

NEXT morning, at the water-drinking, Countess Hohenwalden announced that she had received a telegram from her son, and that he would arrive at six o'clock.

After dinner she introduced him to the Brandons.

Count Conrad von Hohenwalden was thirty-two. He was tall, thin, and brown. He looked intelligent and extremely gentlemanly. He had a tinge of that slight weightiness of person and of manner which is observable in some of the best Austrian men, and which bestows upon those of them who have it a gravity and a calm peculiar to themselves. The expression of his face inspired confidence. His manner to his mother was singularly full of deference ; it was indeed impossible not to be struck by the affection and the respect with which he treated her.

When she brought him up to Miss Brandon, she said—"I present my son to you, and I ask for your goodwill towards him. When you know him you will recognise that he is worthy of a good deal of it."

"My mother places me by those words in a position of grave responsibility towards you," observed Count Hohenwalden, smiling. "Praises beforehand are always difficult to merit."

"Not if they are really deserved, as I am certain they are in your case," replied Harriet Brandon.

"There is a very ancient Swedish proverb," continued Count Hohenwalden—"as old, they say, as Olaf Skotkonung, which tells us—

" 'Do not praise the day until the sun is set ;
Advice until you have followed it ;
Mead until you have drunk it.' "

I fear that, whatever my mother may urge on my behalf, you will apply the principle of that proverb to me, and will wait to see whether in daily use I am worthy of the good which she, so fondly but so rashly, says of me."

"Of course I shall act upon that principle," answered Harriet Brandon. "You would not

believe me if I said anything else. The proverb, too, is a good one to remember."

"I wonder," put in Princess Mohileff, "how many proverbs in Northern Europe contain a reference to mead?"

"Madame," replied Count Hohenwalden, "if it is true that 'proverbs are the echoes of experience,' it must be still more true that they are the echoes of food, for food is precisely the form of experience with which the world is the most naturally and the most universally acquainted."

"That is a paradox," exclaimed Claire. "Experience applies only to the reason, just as food applies only to the body. There is absolutely nothing in common between them—excepting perhaps that in their totally different spheres of action they both sustain."

"Permit me to maintain, mademoiselle, on the contrary—though with infinite regret at being obliged to commence our acquaintance by disagreeing with you—that all nourishment constitutes experience, for without nourishment we should acquire no experience at all."

"Oh, what a subterfuge!" said Harriet Brandon, laughing. "You are not doing

honour to your mother's recommendation. I am disappointed in you already. You begin by setting forth a theory with which no one can agree . . ."

"No one can agree?" cried a voice behind. "Then I am wanted, my dear Miss Brandon," and Madame de Rochedure broke into the circle, all lace and lightness and transparency, very elegant, very brilliant, and very tempestuous. "What are you all quarrelling about?" she asked. "Tell me, and I will settle it for you."

Before any one could answer, Countess Hohenwalden said coldly, "Allow me, madame, to present to you my son."

The Marquise nodded. Count Hohenwalden, who had risen on her arrival, bowed and looked astonished.

"The question is," said Claire, "is food experience?"

"Food experience!" exclaimed the Marquise. "Most certainly it is. The dinners I eat here are all experiences; and most lamentable experiences too."

"But experiences and experience are not at all the same thing," urged Claire.

“Pardon me, Claire. Experience is a consequence of experiences. The plural is the mother of the singular. The more contains the less—that is a rule I was taught at the convent. Count Hohenwalden, what have you to say on the subject of this dispute?”

“I humbly ask permission, madame, to withdraw my cause. I have had the misfortune to put forward a proposition which has been condemned. I do not venture to defend it further.”

“Oh, that will not do at all!” cried the Marquise. “I shall not permit that. I shall act as public prosecutor, and shall proceed to judge if you have done wrong; in which event, of course, you will be punished. Though, as you have only just arrived, the sentence shall be lenient. Defend yourself.”

“In that case,” replied Count Hohenwalden, “I claim the right of appearing by counsel. Miss Brandon,” and he turned to Claire, “will you speak for me, and obtain my acquittal?”

“Why, I am myself the accuser!” exclaimed Claire, excessively amused. “I imagine that, in all the history of law courts,

there has been no example yet of the plaintiff standing forward as advocate of the defendant. I refuse to intervene, and I abandon Count Hohenwalden to the penalty he has incurred."

"Then I find the prisoner guilty," said Madame de Rochedure; "and as there are no extenuating circumstances, his penance shall be more severe than I at first intended. My judgment is, that he shall get up at five to-morrow morning and drink sixteen glasses of water."

"Mademoiselle, you have not been merciful to me," urged Count Hohenwalden. "If you had interceded for me I should not have been condemned at all."

"You attribute to me a power I do not possess," was Claire's reply. "I have no influence whatever over Madame de Rochedure."

"Claire, do you say that because you think it?" inquired the Marquise; "or is it an empty phrase, intended simply to settle your difficulty with Count Hohenwalden?"

"I think it. And not only do I think it; I am certain of it. I have not the slightest influence over you."

“ Well, after all, I suppose it is so,” said the Marquise, meditatively. “ No one has ever influenced me. But if I do make a beginning in that direction, it will be to you, Claire, that I shall address myself, for, honestly, I have a great idea of the value of your guidance. Now, let us go to the dancing. It is a ball night.”

A waltz was beginning as they entered. Count Hohenwalden looked at Claire and asked, “ Shall we try it ? ”

Claire waltzed well. Count Hohenwalden danced as only Viennese can dance. In half-a-dozen steps they caught each other's swing, and, going extremely fast, but smoothly, steadily, strongly, they flew round the room and did not stop until the music ended.

When Claire, a little out of breath, came back to her aunt, she exclaimed, “ Oh, Tatte, he does dance so well ! ”

Countess Hohenwalden, hearing this, answered, with a pleased smile, “ So, mademoiselle, you are beginning to find out his qualities.”

Then other men came up, and Claire had an opportunity of increasing the rather extended knowledge which she possessed already

of the varieties of international waltzing. The comparison confirmed her previous impression that, so far as any rule can be applied to a purely personal accomplishment, the Austrians are the best dancers in Europe, that the Swedes come next to them, that the Prussians take the third place, and that the Southern and Western races (excepting the Belgians, who waltz well) are, usually, inferior performers—the French and English being about the worst of all. She saw these differences when she looked on, as clearly as she felt them when she danced. She recognised that there must be individual exceptions, but, so far as her experience, past and present, permitted her to judge, she had no doubt of the general exactness of the classification she established. And the opinions expressed to her that night by persons who had travelled widely, confirmed her view.

Some of her informants went further still, and assured her that the execution of dance music follows the same geographical order as dancing itself, and pointed to the manner of playing waltzes at Vienna as the first proof thereof.

And so they danced on till bed-time, which came, at Ems, at half-past ten. But, as the ball began at eight, they had had enough.

When Count Hohenwalden met Claire next day, he asked her, "How do you get through the time here? For people, like you and myself, who have no 'cure' to make, it seems to me that it must be difficult to fill the hours."

"That depends on what you desire to put into them," replied Claire. "Of chatter, for instance, there is a quantity at Ems."

"Chatter can scarcely be accepted as an occupation."

"But it is amusement; and the experience you were talking of last night must have taught you that, for many people, amusement is the only perfect occupation."

"It has never been so to me. My idea of occupation is of another sort."

"I have heard your mother make allusions to your occupations. May I ask what they are?"

"Oh, dull work. At least what others call dull work."

"Well?"

“Really, I do not like to tell you, because I have learnt—experience again—that hardly any one cares to listen to my dreams; and because I should be sorry to bore you, to make you think me tiresome, and to see you run away directly I come in sight.”

“Count Hohenwalden, go on, please. Unless my presentiment is altogether false, you will not weary me, but will interest me.”

“Interest you? That seems to me improbable.”

“Because you do not know me. Because you have no reason to suppose that I, too, may have a liking for what you call ‘dull work.’”

“But mine is really very dull.”

“I will judge that when you have informed me what it is. The first clear sentence you allow yourself to pronounce will tell me what I want to know.”

“Then, as you insist, I will confess. My occupation is to try to diminish the sufferings of the poor.”

“I thought so.”

“Shall I go on?”

“Yes, if you please. And now, I repeat, you interest me.”

“But do you mean that *you* care about the poor?”

“If our acquaintance were not limited to a waltz, I should answer that question by saying that it offends me. But, considering that you are as ignorant of my tendencies as I was, just now, of yours, I content myself with replying that I do care about the poor.”

“Why, what do you know about them?”

“Ah, pardon me. At this moment it is for you—not for me—to give explanations.”

“My story is very short, and, in my eyes, very simple; though none of my friends can understand it. My notion of my duty to my name and place is, that I ought to help others. I try to discharge that duty. That is all.”

“And you thought that such a confession would make me run away from you and conceal myself behind corners?”

“What reason had I to think anything else?”

“Well, if my appearance has led you to suppose that it would bore me—that was your word—to hear you talk as you are talking now, I shall have to alter my aspect,

for I do not wish to be regarded by passers-by as incapable of understanding what you call 'duty.'"

"Then, notwithstanding our waltz, I am still only a 'passer-by' to you?"

"Thus far, most certainly. But I add, at once, that it seems to me quite possible we may grow into good friends. What you have just been saying, disposes me to believe that we shall think together on many subjects. Only, treat me seriously, and do not count me in the crowd that seeks nothing but amusement."

"Yet you do seek amusement?"

"Of course. Why should I not? It seems to me that you do, too. Your duty to the poor does not prevent you, it appears, from enjoying talk and dancing, and from sharing in the satisfactions of your place in life."

"From that, I infer that, like myself, you see nothing incoherent in the union, in the same person, of a deep sense of duty to be performed, and of an equally deep appreciation of grace and charm."

"I can discover no incompatibility between the two."

“Well, I have been listening quietly to you,” interrupted Harriet Brandon, who had been working while this talk was going on, “and I think you agree most satisfactorily. Only, although you both assert that you have an equal liking for duty and for charm, I suspect that in each of you there must be, all the same, a preference for one of them over the other.”

“Not, I think, a preference, Tattle; but a separate way and time of using them.”

“Exactly so,” went on Count Hohenwalden. “There again, as your aunt says, we agree. But I venture to add that, in spite of the habitual separation in the employment of duty and of charm, there are happy moments when they can be pursued together; when, indeed, they mix together necessarily, and become one.”

“Your attachment to your mother,” said Harriet Brandon, “seems to me to supply an example of that union.”

“Oh no; I cannot admit that as an example. In my love for my mother I feel nothing—absolutely nothing—except charm. I do not think that the idea of duty could find a place in it. It seems to me that love which

is based on duty is unworthy to be called love."

"How true that is!" exclaimed Claire. "Who was it that said, 'The most absurd of tyrannies is to claim love as a duty'?"

"Yet duty does not necessarily destroy love; though, of course, it usually takes away from it all charm, and, especially, the free choice which ought essentially to constitute its basis."

"Free choice!" exclaimed Claire. "Do you really believe that free choice is the essential starting-point of love? Is not love, on the contrary, in most cases a consequence of accident, of caprice, of random fancy? Remember that choice implies deliberation. There is rarely any deliberation in love."

"In its beginning, certainly," replied Count Hohenwalden. "But for its consolidation and its permanence, deliberation is indispensable."

"No; because, when love has once attained duration, deliberation is replaced by conviction, which is a very different state of mind."

"And duty is more different still. It is not everybody, after all—notwithstanding what we were saying just now about the possible association of duty and charm—it is not every-

body who can act on Frederick the Great's order to his soldiers, to 'make a pleasure of their duty.'"

"Nor everybody," said Claire, "who can admit the theory of Diogenes, that 'love is the pleasure of the idle.'"

"What an odious definition!" cried Count Hohenwalden. "And utterly false as well—so far, at least, as my information goes, for I confess that, personally, I have small experience. I have always understood, from other people and from books, that, as you have just implied, mademoiselle, love does not wait for either idleness or convenient opportunity. It comes in curious places and at strange hours. It comes when it is least expected, sometimes even when it is least wanted. It comes in idleness or in work, in joy or sadness, with or without charm, with or without duty. It may come, indeed, in opposition to duty, and then the case is grave. It is not absolutely essential that love and duty should agree; but it is absolutely indispensable that they should not disagree. Here comes my mother. We will ask for her opinion."

As soon as Countess Hohenwalden had sat

down, Harriet Brandon said to her, "You arrive most opportunely. We have been discussing two questions: the first, whether duty and charm can coexist; the second, what are the relations between love and duty?"

"I can answer without waiting to consider; for, throughout my life, my doctrine about duty has never varied. Duty stands above all considerations, all attractions, all temptations. Charm and love are very pleasant; but duty must do without them both, if it should so happen that it does not fit in with them. I hope my son has not been arguing the other way?"

"I have not been arguing at all, my dear mother. Miss Claire Brandon and I have been comparing impressions, and I have had the satisfaction of finding that, so far as our talk extended, we do not disagree."

"That means, I presume, that Miss Claire is a Liberal and an enthusiast," said the Countess, with some bitterness. "Otherwise, she could scarcely agree with you, Conrad."

"Well, I suppose that, in a certain way, I am both a Liberal and an enthusiast," said Claire. "But still I am not sure that those two words

describe me correctly. It depends on the way they are interpreted."

"My interpretation is," replied Count Hohenwalden, "that enthusiasm gives us ideas, and that Liberalism teaches us to apply them generously. I fear my mother admits neither of those definitions."

"Yet, really, they seem to me," said Claire, "to come fairly near the truth, in the limited direction in which you use them."

"Ah, Conrad, Conrad! you would get nearer still to the truth—to the one unchanging truth—if you abandoned all these wild fancies, and sought to guide yourself, as I do, by the single thought of what you owe to your name and birth. That thought is our sole safe pilot in the difficulties of life."

And then the time came to go elsewhere, and the conversation ended.

After dinner, at the Kursaal dance, Claire stood talking for a time with Princess Mohileff. There happened to be a clear space around, and Count Hohenwalden, who was a few yards off, was able, so long as she had not perceived him, to profit by the opportunity to study her.

She was dressed in silvery white China

crape, with a wide scarf of lace tied round her neck. She had taken off her hat. One hand, in a long loose *Suède* glove, hung down with it; the other, transparent, blue-veined, rose-lined—the round wrist and arm uncovered to the elbow—held, in its thin, lithe fingers, a sea-green silk fan. Her tall figure, bent backward in the pliant slenderness of the waist, seemed almost to wave about; and yet the beauty of its undulating lines, the stateliness and the dignity of its movements and its attitudes, were extraordinary for a girl. On her brown wreathy hair shone points of changing lustre. Her face, illumined always by mobility and vivacity, looked to Count Hohenwalden even more animated, more eloquent, more radiant than before; he thought, indeed, as she laughed with Princess Mohileff in the centre of that great room, that its very imperfections contributed to the striking brilliancy of its expression. The rather too marked squareness of the eyebrows, the deep setting of the eyes themselves, the slight wideness of the mouth, the somewhat insufficient straightness of the thin nose, the comparative lowness of the forehead, the habitual absence of mantling colour

in the cheeks, faults as they were, appeared to be such natural elements of the whole effect, that, instead of weakening it, they aided to vivify and strengthen it. Her great eyes had thrilled him from the first; but that night, their fathomless limpidity of violet blue, their earnest winning tenderness, their deep intensity of meaning and of purpose, appeared to him more wonderful than ever. In the vivid light, alternately, they flashed and floated. And while he watched, in gathering admiration, Claire threw out, unknowingly, from beneath her skirt, an arched supple foot, in a filmy, glossy stocking, and a strangely narrow brown satin shoe. He gazed at it, and knew that, like the eyes, it could not be forgotten. A moment afterwards she upraised her small round head in her accustomed fashion, turned it by chance in his direction, saw him, and bowed with a gay greeting smile. He thought that, until then, it had not been given to him to behold, united in such perfection, the higher forms of grace, of nobleness, of intelligence, and of brightness. He came to her, with an emotion he could not define, and asked her for another waltz.

Later on, he danced with Madame de Rochedure, and said, "May I put a question to you? You declared, last night, that if ever you needed guidance you would apply for it to Miss Claire Brandon. What did that mean?"

"It meant purely and simply what it said. It is only since she has been here that I have really become acquainted with her; our meetings in Paris did not count. But though I have only seen her for a few days, she has aroused in me already a strong admiration for her capacities, and an equally strong confidence in her character."

"Do you know anything of her family?"

"Nothing. How should I know? At least I know so little that it counts for nothing. I never inquire about things of that sort; they do not interest me?"

"That is not the view in Austria."

"Nor among certain people in France either. But between the societies of France and Austria, as a whole, there is the same difference as between the modern and the ancient, between revolution and tradition. In Paris very few of us attach importance to

origins — luckily for people like myself, who are not ‘born.’”

“But I believe the Brandons are what you call ‘born.’”

“I daresay they are. They look as if they were. But then I have been told that I, too, look ‘born,’ and I can affirm to you that I am not. Really I do not care. Are your prejudices so stupendous that you are unable to accept temporary acquaintances at a watering-place without first assuring yourself that the blood in their veins is noble enough to justify you in saying good morning to them?”

“Individually I do not attach to blood the price which is usually attributed to it amongst my friends.”

“Especially by your mother?”

“Especially by my mother. And it saddens me to know that I pain her by not participating in her dogmas on the subject. I look upon birth far more as a responsibility than as a privilege. Of course I do not pretend to be indifferent to it—it would be impossible to be indifferent to the possession of such a name as mine. Of course I recognise the fact that our vanity invests illustrious descent with

special value. But, as my mother says again, I am a Liberal in politics and an enthusiast in sentiment, and I have opinions of my own."

"Well, Count, I beat you in both directions; for I am a Radical in politics and a lunatic in sentiment. We are both of us products of our period; only I am more advanced than you are, for the reason that my home is cast amongst surroundings that are more stimulating than yours."

"But you did not tell me the little that you do know about the Brandons."

"I know—that is to say, I have heard—that they are of an old country stock; something approaching, I suppose, to what we call in France *noblesse de province*, only they have no title, so that, in Continental eyes, they are not noble at all. I have heard, too, that Claire's parents died when she was very young, and that she has been brought up entirely by this aunt. And that is all I have been told. But why are you so curious? If you are a Liberal, what can their position matter to you?"

"Of course it does not matter. But habit is stronger than reason. One cannot help asking."

“Unhealthy curiosity, Count. Instead of asking idle questions, you had much better take another turn with me before this waltz ends.”

And away went Madame de Rochedure, in an eddying whirl of vaporous elegance, with little feet flitting lightly underneath. And men looked on and thought, “She is delicious !”

A few minutes later Madame de Rochedure took a vacant seat next to Harriet Brandon and said to her, “Count Hohenwalden has been questioning me about you. He wants to know who you are.”

The blood rushed to Harriet Brandon’s cheeks. For a moment she could reply nothing.

“And . . . what did you answer ?” she inquired, as soon as she had composed herself a little.

“I told him the little I knew.”

“Well . . . you can inform him . . . if you like . . . that we are Brandons of Hurley . . . an old name that is known in England. Not so old or so great as Hohenwalden ; but, still . . . a name. Besides, I have told his mother about our family.”

“Then your magnificent niece adds birth to her other superiorities?”

“Yes . . . yes . . .” replied Harriet Brandon, hesitatingly and painfully.

At that instant Count Hohenwalden and Claire dashed past in another waltz, and Madame de Rochedure exclaimed, as she watched them, “How perfectly they go together! They are certainly a most striking couple.”

And then the Russian general came for her, and Harriet Brandon remained alone to think over her recommencing fear. She began to ask herself if they were impostors.

CHAPTER XIII.

CLAIRE had once more forgotten her pre-occupations about the secret which she thought was being kept from her. She was young enough and buoyant enough to be able to lose sight of care, unless it thrust itself forward very obstinately; and furthermore, she was for the moment occupied, interested, and amused. She noticed sometimes in her aunt an expression of sadness and anxiety, but she imagined it was a consequence of the state of her throat, which worried her a good deal.

So Claire contented herself with showing redoubled tenderness to her aunt. She covered her with caresses, and assured her, in many varieties of words, that she would soon be well again.

Harriet Brandon kept her apprehensions to herself, and suffered silently.

Madame de Rochedure—who had more heart than she got credit for—observed that Miss Brandon was out of spirits, and did her best to make her laugh and cheer her. The dressing of the German women was especially a subject she could not leave alone, and seeing that she amused Miss Brandon, she was perpetually pouring out fantastic histories about it.

“I perceived a wonderful example this morning,” she said, as half-a-dozen of their group were sitting in the gardens before luncheon,—“a really stupendous example. For the moment there happen to be no Germans with us, so I can tell you all about it without offending anybody. She may have come from Würtemberg, or Mecklenburg, or Brandenburg, or Magdeburg. May fate forgive the place that gave her birth! I looked at her. I did, positively. I had that tremendous valour.”

“Voltaire declares, madame,” interrupted the Russian, “that ‘true courage consists in knowing how to suffer.’ You are proving to us that you possess it.”

“Yes, General, I suffered horribly—but I looked, which, as you say, demonstrates that

I am really brave. Now, try to follow me. What I am going to say is startlingly incredible, but I trust your intelligences are sufficiently acute to enable you to grasp it."

"We listen with strained attention," said the Dane.

"Her gown was blue; her hat was red; her gloves were green; her boots were yellow—all of the fiercest tints. And the remainder of the seven colours were represented impartially in other details of her covering. But all that, peremptory as it was, remained almost imperceptible, for the reason that, over and on the top of what were supposed to be her clothes, she had superadded independent ornaments in such quantity, such diversity, such anarchy, that the ornaments concealed the clothes."

"Thus far my intelligence enables me to comprehend," observed Count Hohenwalden.

"All that is merely the introduction," went on the Marquise. "The difficulty is coming now. Most happily we are speaking French, and French is a language of such discriminative designations, of such descriptive epithets, of such finely shaded adjectives, a language of such delicate precision, combined with such

luxuriant abundance, that it permits an exactness and a fertility of definition which would be unattainable in any other tongue."

"Do go on, please," said Claire. "We are too impatient to be able to support parentheses."

"Well, here is a catalogue of her ornaments—at ten o'clock in the morning, remember. On her chest reposed a round ivory locket, about four inches in diameter, on which were sculptured the entire adventures of Alexander the Great, with special delineations of Bucephalus and the Gordian knot. On and around it wandered three necklaces, one in amber, one in coral, one in blue glass, and each collar possessed four rows. Her ear-rings depicted, in imitation silver, the harrowing spectacle of scorpions creeping into birds' nests to devour the new-hatched bantlings. She wore on various angles of her person—and, in spite of the ornaments, I could see there were a great many angles—five brooches of about the size of ostrich-eggs, composed, respectively, of jet, mosaic, Rhine pebbles, stamped leather, and carved wood. I could not count her bracelets; there may have been eighteen of them; they

seemed to be made principally of stucco, with inlayings of bronze, jet, tortoise-shell, lava, marble, earthenware, bamboo, and painted metal, and with more ivory, more coral, more amber, and more blue glass. Various small reptiles were set forth upon them, and I distinctly saw, additionally, a dromedary, a palm-tree, and an octopus. And with all this she had stuck on to her hat and gown a limitless accumulation of scraps and shreds and patches of multifarious stuffs and substances and shades. I really cannot classify them. They overcame me utterly. I can only mention the most conspicuous of them, as they happen, in the disorder which was their special characteristic, to come back to my recollection. There were braids, buckles, buttons, beads ; artificial seaweed, grasses, flowers, and acorns ; lace, ribbons, feathers, flounces, frills, and bits of fur ; knots, bows, straps, clasps, pleats, and bands ; embroidery, and tufts, and spangles, and trimmings, and tassels, and rosettes. And there was three times more than that—only I cannot remember it. The very freckles on her face seemed to be put on as ornaments. I need not say that all was of the vilest quality ;

faded, creased, and shabby. Everything she had upon her could have been bought for thirty-three francs in a bazaar. And that is the German women's theory of dress! Poor Germany! . . . And yet they beat us in the war!"

"Well," said Claire, "allowing for the effulgent colouring which you put into your pictures, all this simply proves that, according to her lights, your 'example' had the intention to attract. What else do other women dress for? The form varies, but the object is everywhere the same."

"Why, Claire, can you — you the art critic, you the appreciator of taste—can you pretend that in dress the form is not everything and all? If the mere intention to attract is to be accepted as sufficient, we might as well go back to togas or cowhides, or take to tattooing, and rings in our noses."

"And why not?" asked Princess Mohileff—"if we pleased thereby."

"Why not? Because the entire theory of dress—in the sense of attraction—consists in improving the appearance of those who wear it."

“In whose eyes? may I ask,” said Claire.

“In the eyes of the beholder, of course.”

“And the people of other times and other races—were they not beholders? Were not their notions of what pleased them as worthy of respect as ours?”

“Oh, my dear Claire, if, in the immensity of your love for humanity, you are going to negroes for elegance, and to ancient savages for an ideal, I shall have to abandon the discussion. I cannot really follow you in such voyages.”

“I am only proving how true it is that I am a Liberal, as I said yesterday to Count Hohenwalden. If Liberalism is really felt, it extends to every thought we have. It makes me feel, amongst other things, that ‘le beau est ce qui plait.’ That is all.”

“That is all! Why, your ‘all’ means universal chaos. There is but one place in the whole world where women have ever known how to dress. That place is Paris. Whatever is produced elsewhere is outside the law.”

“But I deny the existence of a law,” insisted Claire. “I claim for every individual woman the right to form and to apply her

own separate theory of the beautiful, according to her own separate conceptions. The influences of time and place may be relied on to prevent her from going too far."

"Let me suggest to you not to recommence the eternal quarrel about the nature of the beautiful," put in Countess Hohenwalden. "Neither of you can help to settle it."

"Indeed, madame," answered Claire, "I have not the presumption to wish to settle it. I was only defending the remarkable 'example' Madame de Rochedure found this morning. The 'example' simply used her individual liberty."

"Liberty! Liberty!" repeated Madame de Hohenwalden, with evident distress.

"The liberty of being ugly! The liberty of being ridiculous!" exclaimed Madame de Rochedure. "The only two liberties I shall never be able to admit! Claire, Claire! how can *you*, of all people, stand forward to defend the free rights of hideousness and absurdity?"

"Because," remarked Count Hohenwalden, "Mademoiselle Claire has the courage of her opinions—a courage which is sometimes as high and real as to know how to suffer."

"Yes, martyrs have proved that," observed Harriet Brandon.

"Then my 'example' of this morning was a martyr," cried Madame de Rochedure, getting up to go away, "for she, most certainly, had the courage of her opinions. And yet it seemed to me, when I looked at her, that it was I who was the martyr."

In the afternoon they all went together up the lower slopes of the Malberg, and Claire found herself, by accident, walking in the woods with Count Hohenwalden. She profited by the opportunity to say to him: "I should like to hear more of what you are doing. Will you tell me?"

"There is really nothing to relate," was the reply. "I left the army, five years ago, because it did not seem to me that I was of any use there, and because I had a feeling that I could, perhaps, render service elsewhere. I had friends who held the same opinions. So we joined our efforts and adopted a common plan of action, and we have the satisfaction of being able to believe that, in a small way, we are helping others."

"But, will you not give me details?"

“No, really; I had rather not. I hate to talk about myself. Besides, I gather that you have been amongst the poor yourself; if so, you know as much as I could tell you.”

“Do you find pleasure in it?”

“Most certainly. Keen enjoyment. With a mixture of pain, of course. But unfortunately, I have one special difficulty. My mother disapproves it. Of course she does not argue that I am wrong to try to diminish suffering; she endeavours to do that herself, in other directions. But it shocks her cruelly that I should think the poor as good as I am. She does not object to what I do, but to my motive for doing it.”

“What does she desire?”

“Only that I should treat the world as becomes a Hohenwalden. In her eyes the sole utility of the earth is that it bears through space the name and honour of the Hohenwaldens. Her view and mine differ so entirely that I have the sorrow of feeling we can never agree. I try to act as a man, although I am a Hohenwalden. My mother wishes me to act as a Providence, because I

am a Hohenwalden. I really fancy, sometimes, that she believes we possess divine attributes."

"But yet I heard her say, before you came here, that she is proud of you, and that you bear your name worthily."

"Of course she says that to acquaintances. But to myself she unfolds her real mind. I love her so earnestly that I am intensely grieved to know that I pain her. And yet I cannot change; for, like her, I am certain I am right."

"Right in what?"

"In believing myself no better than other people."

"Does it ever occur to you to go further still, and to believe yourself much less than other people?"

Count Hohenwalden looked at Claire. "Why do you ask that?" he said.

"Simply because it often happens to me to regard myself as utterly unworthy and inferior, and because I cannot help imagining that others must experience, sometimes, the same feeling."

"Well, honestly, I feel it too. But I en-

treat you to let no one know that I have said so, for if my dear mother heard it, she would never forgive me." Then, after a moment of hesitation, Count Hohenwalden added—"But why do I confess all this to you? I never made similar admissions to any one before—excepting to the friends with whom I work."

"But, if we think alike on certain questions, is it not quite natural that we should be led to say so to each other? It seems to me, too, that it is I who have set the example."

"Yes. But you are more free than I am. You can speak out. You owe no duty to a mother, as I do."

"I owe a duty to myself which is, at least, as high as any I could owe to others."

Count Hohenwalden looked again, with evident astonishment. He answered—"That is the very argument I address to my own heart, when it urges me to yield to my dear mother. It is surprising that we should think so much alike."

"From what I have been able to perceive of your nature, and from what I know of my own, it seems to me that it would be still

more surprising if we had no sympathy on such points as these."

And then they came up to a group of the others, and the conversation stopped.

After a few minutes Madame de Rochedure asked Count Hohenwalden, "What were you two talking about while you were wandering alone?"

"About everything and something else," was the reply.

"Did you get on well together?"

"Excellently. The last word we used was 'sympathy.'"

"Sympathy!" exclaimed the Marquise. "A most unsatisfactory word. My professor of rhetoric—who was, really, a very instructive man—maintained that it is a word by which we explain everything, but from which we comprehend nothing. If you are satisfied with having acquired such a product as that, you must be very easy to content."

"And what word would suffice to content *you*, Marquise?" asked the Spanish secretary of legation.

"As I have no desire whatever to be contented, I need not answer the question."

“Alas !” went on the Spaniard ; “no words will satisfy you ? Then what will become of all the poems I have been laboriously composing in your honour ?”

“Poems in my honour ? Spanish songs ? Pray do not waste even your idle hours on me. Remember, too, that Spanish songs are made up exclusively of four specific subjects—they are allowed to contain nothing else—love, death, fair girls and dark girls. So, as it happens that I love nobody, that I do not propose to die, and that I am neither fair nor dark, it is impossible to write a Spanish song about me.”

“A most unanswerable and altogether crushing argument,” observed the Italian colonel, delighted to see a rival discomfited.

“And an absolutely true one,” added Claire. “Here is a proof of it.” And she repeated, to the amusement of everybody, the well-known Petenera—

“If you do not love me, I shall die,
Murmur the blue eyes ;
If you do not love me, I will kill myself,
Exclaim the black ones.”

“Perfect ! Admirable ! Well remembered !” cried out everybody.

“Certainly most *apropos*,” said Count Hohenwalden. “But, as my word ‘sympathy’ has gone out of sight in this skirmish about Spain, and as I persist in claiming for it true merit and true meaning, I appeal to Miss Claire Brandon to find another felicitous quotation in order to prove its value.”

“As between your two selves?” asked the Marquise, with an air of snow-like innocence.

Claire blushed violently, and exclaimed, angrily, “Count Hohenwalden is discussing grammar. I beg you to seek no other meaning in his words.”

Countess Hohenwalden and Harriet Brandon listened, looked, and both seemed very grave. And then they all went down the hill again.

As soon as Countess Hohenwalden was alone with her son, she said to him, with a certain expression of annoyance, “Conrad, I do not attach importance to the babble of that mad Frenchwoman, but still I am obliged to ask you, what is the signification of the ‘sympathy’ she talks about with such impertinence and bad taste?”

“The signification, my dear mother, is very simple. It is the ordinary sympathy which

springs up naturally between any two persons who find that they agree on certain points. Let me remind you that the word sympathy was first mentioned by myself, in the presence of a dozen people. Surely you cannot suppose that I should have employed it, under such conditions, if it had any other meaning."

"Well, Conrad, I presume it is unnecessary for me to say that I do not wish you to fall in love with this English girl. I like her very much; she is full of merits and capacities, and is far away superior to the mass of the young women of to-day. But, as you cannot marry her, it seems to me that you had better not be so much with her. You might burn your fingers, for she is, really, very attractive. And anyhow, you expose yourself to comments—as we have just seen."

"My dear mother, I assure you I have no intention of falling in love with Miss Claire Brandon. But let me say to you, as a mere abstract proposition, that if I did so, I think she is quite fit to be my wife."

"She could not be your wife," replied his mother, in an absolute tone. "She is not noble."

“Why do we go on discussing this? It serves no purpose. I am not in love with the young lady; I do not intend to fall in love with her; I do not propose to marry her. But, my dear mother, that renders it all the more easy for me to repeat, in justice to her, that I think her, in every respect, as good as I am.”

“I regret that you should say so. But, as you observe, it is perhaps useless to continue.”

Count Hohenwalden left his mother and went to his room. He found, with surprise, that his thoughts continued to dwell on the talk he had just had. He could not get them away from it. He noticed that the words “you cannot marry her” kept sounding in his ears. He stood still and meditated. He told himself, rather angrily, that the conversation was totally unimportant, and that it was absurd to permit the recollection of it to pursue him. And yet it did pursue him—with persistence. Suddenly, a question stood out before him: had he stated the exact truth to his mother? Was it certain that he was indifferent to Claire? This suspicion vexed

him and humiliated him. Never had he spoken to Countess Hohenwalden one single word that was not literally, utterly true, and the fear that he might have unknowingly deceived her, shocked him. His whole relations with her, since his childhood, had been made up of loving trust and confidence; he had grown to differ widely from her; he did not allow her to dominate him; he had told her so; and for that very reason it seemed to him all the more impossible that he could ever admit an equivocation or even a misconception between them. Had he—who had always been so outspoken with her—been insincere with her at last? If so, he must put it straight at once. What was the real condition of his feelings towards Claire? He examined himself attentively, and perceived, with surprise, that both her person and her character had impressed him more than he had recognised until that moment. He was obliged to own, now that the subject had been dragged unexpectedly before him, that Claire was not indifferent to him. Indeed, as he progressed further in the analysis of his sensations, he realised that though, most

positively, he was not in love with her, he was, just as positively, attracted by her. A memory appeared to him, clearly, winningly. He saw her as she had stood the evening before, in her white dress; her slight form swaying—almost like a tall flower in the wind; her deep eyes turning towards him and growing brighter with the smile that rose in her when she saw him. The charming dignity of her mien and manner, the delicate elegance of her person, the brightness of her talk, the freshness of her ideas—all this came back to him—all this seemed suddenly to gain in power, in value, in effect. Last of all, there rose before him the hot blush which had dashed into her cheeks when Madame de Rochedure put that reckless question. The indignant answer she had made to it came echoing back to him. What did that indicate on her part? Of course she took no interest in him. There was no reason why she should. But still, that blush!

And then he walked up and down, and said, “Is it possible that I can be at the beginning of an attachment? I have loved no woman; I have little experience to guide

me ; yet it seems to me, from what I can comprehend of my condition, that, unconsciously, I have already lost some part of my free will. What shall I do ? I have met no girl like her. Now that I begin to think seriously about her, now that I try to measure with precision the effect she has produced upon me, I see more and more clearly that she stands apart. Consequently, it looks possible—probable, even—judging from what I have already learnt to feel during these few days, that if I remain here and continue in constant contact with her, I may be really in love with her before long. That would mean a grave difficulty with my mother. I should accept that difficulty if once I were in love. With all my deference for my mother, I never would permit her to regulate my convictions, still less to control my heart. But would it be right of me to thrust myself voluntarily into a situation if I knew that it would end in pain for her ? Would it be right of me, with my eyes open to the possible results, to expose myself to fall in love—not being in love already, and being able, as I believe, to check myself—under conditions which she has told me she disap-

proves? Shall I go away? Or am I strong enough to brave the danger and to resist it? And what am I to say, at once, to my mother? I fear that I have told her a lie. In what form shall I retire from it?" And he went on walking up and down, thinking, and asking himself questions.

Finally—as happens generally in such cases—he decided that he could and would face the risk. Decidedly, on reflection, he was strong enough to do so. Of course Claire was infinitely winning, and of course it pleased him to be with her and to look at her; but he would take good care not to fall in love with her—certainly, he would not do that. It would be ridiculous to go away. The circumstances did not justify flight. Besides, it would be disagreeable. He wanted to stop at Ems.

Consequently it was unnecessary to say anything more to his mother. After all, he had told her the truth. He was *not* in love with Claire.

While Count Hohenwalden was agitated by these reflections, Claire on her side was passing through perplexities of the same nature.

She had been offended and shocked by the

indiscretion of Madame de Rochedure; but what preoccupied her even more than the vexing words that lady had pronounced, was the sudden consciousness they had awakened in her that, without perceiving what she was doing, she had drifted into a sort of intimacy with Count Hohenwalden. The strong development of the perceptive side of her character enabled her to discern consequences and results with rare rapidity; while the delicacy of her feminineness made her attach a somewhat exaggerated importance to any act which might seem to her, rightly or wrongly, to be open to unfavourable interpretation. Those two influences led her, after a few moments of thought, to ask herself, with fear, and with a vague notion that she had been doing wrong, "Have I gone too far with him? Am I to blame?"

She stopped and hesitated; and then—abruptly, violently—she put another question. And as she put it, the blood mantled in her cheeks, and her face burned, and though she was alone, she hid her face instinctively: "Do I love him?" Angrily, almost convulsively, she answered, "Love him? . . . Absurd! . . . I have only known him for three days. I like

him . . . certainly. I like him very much. . . . But . . . love him? . . . No. That is utterly ridiculous. Why do I talk such folly? Yet . . . what is it that I feel for him? I do feel something—something I have never felt before.” The hot flush left her cheeks, she grew almost pale, she steadied her thoughts with an effort, and again she asked herself, “What is it?—I must have this out with myself. Such a doubt as this cannot be left unsettled. It may be my whole future that I am handling now.”

She thought intently. After a while she stood up, and—with a half-frightened smile and a returning blush—she murmured, almost audibly, “Positively . . . I do believe I love him. What else can it be? . . . Yet . . . is it possible, in three days, to learn to love? . . . No, it is not love. It cannot be. It is only preference. It is only that sympathy he spoke of himself. And yet . . . and yet . . . if, really, it were more than that?”

She stopped again, for an instant, and looked down, nervously, as if she did not dare to go on to the next question. “But . . . if it *were* more than that? If . . . oh, it is too

silly. Yet . . . if it is so ; . . . if I, without measuring my conduct, have allowed myself to go too far. If I am interested, if I am beginning to feel inclination . . . what does *he* feel? Surely he does not love *me*? He has just said, before a dozen persons, that we have 'sympathy' for each other. But could he say it publicly, like that, laughing, if he really thought we had? If he were possessed by true sympathy, he would not profane its early bloom by talking of it to strangers. No—he cares nothing for me. Then why should I care for him? I will stop this at once. I see the danger. Thank God, my eyes are opened. It is not too late, I trust. I will not permit myself to love until I know that I am loved. The companion of my life, alone, shall have my tenderness, my faith, my heart. Count Hohenwalden, we will go no further. If this is love I feel for you, I will tear it out of me—unless . . . unless . . . you love me."

The whole direction of her thoughts changed instantly. She repeated, very slowly, "Unless . . . unless . . . you love me."

She smiled to herself. Soft tears came into her eyes. "To be loved by him," she said,

“ would be a great joy. It seems to me that I could give myself to him—altogether. And yet—three days! It is absurd. How can I be so childish? What is it, precisely, that I do feel? Let me be exact. For the first time, I have a preference. That is certain. I have a preference for a man who, so far as I can judge, has no preference for me. And yet—is that quite true? It is evident that he seeks me—that he likes to be with me. That means preference—in some degree at least. But why did he talk of ‘sympathy’ before all those people? That would have been most indelicate—if he meant a sympathy of affection. No, there is no doubt about it. He does not care for me. Decidedly, I must keep away from him. That is the only road to follow.”

But it was not easy to keep away from him. Claire discovered that within an hour. They were living in the same hotel; they had the same acquaintances; they were leading the same life. They met at once—at dinner. It happened, that evening, that a group of them sat at a large table, and that Count Hohenwalden’s place was next to Claire. It happened, too, that they all went together to the

Kursaal, and that Claire waltzed three times with him. And it happened that, at the dinner and at the dance, they talked and laughed and looked. All this, of course, was mere accident; neither of them had the slightest intention to do anything of the kind; they were firmly resolved, even, to do quite the contrary; but, somehow, the result was, that they both went home a good deal more drawn to each other than they had been before dinner.

Their eyes were open to the peril. They were determined to defend themselves against it. But their very consciousness of it gave greater force to it. Deceived by the belief that they were struggling against it, they allowed it to obtain a stronger hold of them.

They said good night with feelings and with looks they had not known before. And both of them, as soon as they were alone, were very angry with themselves for the foolishness of their behaviour.

And, yet, as they said to themselves, what else could they do? It was impossible to turn their backs upon each other. It was not they

who were to blame. They desired, honestly, to keep apart ; but, in spite of their resolution, circumstances threw them together. That was no fault of theirs. To-morrow they would be more careful, and would not permit circumstances to act upon them.

They both fell asleep with these reasonings in their heads.

Another person, who was near them, was unable to sleep at all. Harriet Brandon sat in her room, wondering, helplessly, when the storm would burst. She could not shut her eyes to its approach. She saw it coming—nearer, nearer. When Claire was to be married, the secret must come out. The little scene on the Malberg had been a symptom. But, whether it was Count Hohenwalden or another, whether it was this time or the next, were, in Harriet Brandon's eyes, almost unimportant details. The fact which overpowered her was, that, with some one and at some time, marriage was a certainty for Claire. Such a girl could not escape it. And then, as the Marquise d'Hérystal had said to her, the truth must be told,—unless, indeed, she married an Englishman, in which

case the story would be known to him. What would be the influence of the revelation upon Claire, and upon her attitude towards herself? It was too horrible to measure. Harriet Brandon struggled to drive away the hideous thought. She was utterly unable to support it.

And there she sat, alone with her terror.

Three days passed by. Three days of consciousness, of hesitation, of constant meetings, and of increasing inclination between Claire and Count Hohenwalden. Three days of augmenting suspicion and anxiety for Countess Hohenwalden and Harriet Brandon.

On the evening of the third day Count Conrad became conscious that he had nearly reached the limit of his power of resistance, and that, if he continued to see Claire, his feelings towards her would run away with him.

He was in that state of mind, and was asking himself what he ought to do, when his mother said to him, abruptly, "Well, Conrad, is it still 'only sympathy'?—or is it becoming something else?"

This question opened his eyes more clearly

still to the reality of his danger. He hesitated for a while, and then, with prompt decision, he replied, "I think, my dear mother, that it is becoming something else ; or, at all events, that it might become something else if I went on. I told you three days ago, that I had no intention of falling in love with Miss Claire Brandon. That was true—absolutely true. Since then I have examined myself carefully ; since then I have seen more of her, and I find now, that she has produced upon me a perceptible effect, and that I might be led to fall in love with her. You declared to me that, in your opinion, I cannot marry her. That would not be my own view, if I loved her. Let that be clearly understood between us ; I cannot sacrifice my right of liberty—even to you. But, as I do not love her yet ; as it is still time to stop ; as my feeling towards her is only, thus far, a deep sympathy—much deeper than I imagined, but yet only a sympathy—and as I believe it to be curable, I have decided, out of tenderness and respect for you, to run no further risk. Consequently, I have this instant made up my mind to leave Ems to-morrow morning, by

the first train. I count upon you to explain my sudden disappearance. Say that I have been called away on business."

Countess Hohenwalden looked steadily at her son, and remained silent for some seconds. Then, with a little trembling in her voice, she said, "Conrad, your decision is worthy of you. I can give it no higher praise. Kiss me."

Next morning Countess Hohenwalden met Claire before the Kurhaus.

"My dear young lady," she exclaimed, "imagine how distressed I am! My son received a telegram last night, calling him immediately to Pressburg, on urgent business. He left me an hour ago. He begged me to offer his very humble homage to your aunt and to yourself."

Claire did not wince. She felt she had received a frightful blow; but she stood up to it.

In her heart she asked, "Why did he leave without seeing me?"

She walked up and down in the crowd, and mechanically looked for him. She could not realise that he was gone, gone without a word

of farewell, and that they were to meet no more.

And then, suddenly, she felt alone. She called upon herself for courage. But she found that courage did not come. She sighed wearily. The sensation of loneliness increased.

It did not occur to her to doubt the explanation offered by Countess Hohenwalden. It seemed quite natural that a telegram should have come, and that he should have left on business. To suspect that his departure had any connection with herself would have been, in her eyes, unwarranted and presumptuous. That she should have a preference for Count Hohenwalden appeared to her quite natural. That he should have a preference for her seemed, under all the circumstances, excessively improbable. And even if he had a preference, it could only be a very moderate one, a "sympathy," as he had described it before everybody. If he was called away, it was natural he should go. Why should he stop because of her? She had defined her opinion of herself correctly to him, when she said, "I regard myself as unworthy and

inferior." She had no conceit whatever—except, perhaps, about her will; on that one point she did imagine she had a value. And as she had no intimacies with girls, had heard no confidences about men, and had listened to no talk of their proceedings, she was dependent on book descriptions and her own imagination for her idea of the nature and the behaviour of love. So she believed the story told her, and was simply sad, very sad.

Madame de Rochedure, who was better acquainted with the realities of life and with the motives of men and women, looked inquisitively at Claire, when they met; but she could detect no symptoms of emotion. Yet she thought, "All the same, it is the Countess who has sent her son away."

CHAPTER XIV.

COUNTESS HOHENWALDEN had not found that Ems was doing her as much good as in other years. The treatment there is always rather irritating, but she had borne it usually without ill effects. On the evening which followed her son's departure she felt very unwell, and complained to Harriet Brandon of heat and soreness in the chest.

Next morning she was so ill that she could not get up.

The Brandons begged for leave to sit with her. She could not talk without producing an attack of cough, so Claire read the papers to her. The doctor told her she was fortunate to have so excellent a nurse, and by degrees she ceased to protest, as she had done at first, against the self-sacrifice of Claire in persisting to stop with her.

The truth was that, as Count Hohenwalden was no longer in Ems, Claire had no interest in going out. Furthermore, she always liked to be of use in helping to lessen suffering; and in this particular case she had the satisfaction of feeling that she was nursing *his* mother.

The night was bad. Fever had set in. Claire would not leave the room. She shared the watching with Berthe and the Countess's maid.

Towards morning the fever became violent and the coughing almost incessant. The doctor came at seven, said the inflammation had spread into the lungs, and prescribed a blister and perfect quiet. But as the room was near the staircase no quiet could be got, so Claire insisted that the Countess should be carried to her own bed, which was in a corner of the house, beyond their sitting-room.

In twenty-four hours more Countess Hohenwalden was very gravely ill. She was extremely weak, and scarcely conscious. The Brandons asked the doctor if it was necessary to telegraph for Count Conrad. He answered he had no immediate fear, but that it would be as well to do so. There was, however, a difficulty. Countess Hohenwalden could not

speaking, and the maid did not know where the Count was. She was able only to give the address of the house in Vienna, and the name of the head-servant there. So a telegram was sent to that servant instructing him to find out Count Conrad wherever he might be, and let him know what was happening.

And then she got worse still, and the next three days and nights were passed in extreme anxiety. Claire never left the room, excepting for a few hours in the afternoons, when she allowed herself to sleep. Her aunt entreated her to let others share the night-watching with her. She refused. Every remedy was applied by her; every service was rendered by her. The doctor was astonished at the resolution she showed, at the lightness of her touch, at her forethought, her patience, her resistance to fatigue. He said to her, "Gracious Fräulein, if the Countess recovers, it will be, in part, to you that she will owe her life."

And Claire went on, not realising exactly why she did all this. It was her first experience in a sick-room. She found in it the satisfaction of duty discharged. She continued, too, to feel, as she had felt at the beginning, that it was *his* mother she was nursing.

In the early dawn of the fifth day after the telegram had been sent, Count Hohenwalden reached Ems once more. He rushed into the hotel, and cried, with extreme emotion, "How is she? How is she?"

The night porter and a sleepy woman were the only people awake. They knew generally that the Countess was very ill, but nothing more. They told him so. And then he sprang up the stairs in eager haste to see her.

The woman ran after him, and called to him, "The Countess is not in her old room. She is in Miss Claire Brandon's room."

"In Miss Claire Brandon's room!" exclaimed the Count, amazed at this strange news. "In Miss Claire Brandon's room! Why? What for? But then . . . but then . . . I cannot go in."

"I will see," replied the maid. And she went on before him, crossed the Brandons' sitting-room, and turned, gently, the handle of the door beyond.

All was dark. The curtains were closed. The night-light was flickering out. The heavy breathing of Countess Hohenwalden alone broke the stillness.

With one hand on the half-opened door and the other stretched out behind her, the servant stooped forward and looked. She could make out nothing. Close up to her, peering intently over her, leaned the Count. For a long minute they were motionless. Then the servant made a slow movement forward, and Count Hohenwalden, unable to resist the longing to see his mother, followed softly. The servant, thinking her mission ended, discreetly went away. Gradually his eyes became accustomed to the gloom, and at last he managed to descry his mother, obscurely, doubtfully. He made another step and knelt down at her bedside. And there, in fear, in stillness, in unshaped prayer, not daring to reveal his presence, not knowing even that she would recognise him if she saw him, he bowed his head. The stertorous respirations filled him with infinite distress. He longed to throw his arms round his mother, and to tell her he had come. He listened, and grew more and more oppressed. And as he listened, he fancied he was conscious, between the husky moans, of a low gentle sound, regular, repeated—a sound so frail that he could barely hear it, but which,

he was quite sure, was real. With extreme caution he lifted up his head, and turned his eyes in the direction of that soft sound, and, in the sombre dimness, he discerned, two yards away from him, a slight white outline in an arm-chair. He felt certain—though he could not see distinctly—that a woman was asleep there. His heart began to beat; a name was whispered within him. Slowly, silently he rose; slowly, silently he stepped backwards towards the door; and at the door he stopped and strained his eyes, not at his mother, but at the sleeping figure in the chair. He was unable to distinguish forms. Still he could perceive, vaguely, that the head lay backwards, falling sideways on the shoulder; that the face was so intensely pale that it seemed almost to give out faint light amidst the gloom; that dark hair strayed confusedly around it; that the arms hung downwards, unstrung, feeble, nearly straight; that, in that shadowy picture of prostration and exhaustion, even the folds of the long loose dress drooped wearily. He gazed, and murmured—"It is Claire Brandon!" And, still silently and slowly, he passed beyond the door,

closed it noiselessly, and threw himself on a sofa in the other room.

He tried to think. But his extreme fatigue—from long travel and overstrained anxiety—rendered him incapable of reflection. His mother was alive. He had arrived in time. In that there was immense consolation. But of her condition he had learnt nothing yet; he knew that she was very gravely ill—but that was all. And at her pillow he had found, worn out with watching over her, the girl he had determined to see no more—to avoid whom he had quitted Ems a week before. His mother was lying in that girl's room! What could it mean? The interest he had felt in Claire, the interest he had done his best to drive away from him, came back in a great wave. He understood absolutely nothing; but an immense respect and gratitude filled up his heart towards her. He made prolonged efforts to comprehend the situation; but he could not. He felt himself for the moment incapable of reasoning. He lay there, fagged, nervous, apprehensive; and yet, although he would not avow it to himself, encouraged, gladdened, soothed, by the sur-

prising presence of Claire at his mother's side. He lay there quite still in the growing daylight and wondered.

He made painful efforts to reflect. By degrees his ideas became clearer. By degrees he recognised that absence had changed nothing. He knew that he had tried to free himself from the charm. He knew that he had struggled to expel a memory from his heart. He knew that sometimes during the preceding week he had imagined he was succeeding. He told himself he had fought honestly, and that if he had remained away he might have won the battle with himself. But he perceived that he had come back too soon, while the conflict within him was at its height, while he was still incapable of indifference. And on arriving, he had found himself in a situation so extraordinary that it seemed as if fate had taken the conduct of his heart out of his own hands, and had deprived him of all further power of resistance. He was agitated profoundly.

An hour passed away. He had not changed his place.

At last he heard a sound. The door of the

inner room began to move. With extreme excitement he sprang to his feet, his gaze fixed upon the door.

It opened slowly.

Claire appeared.

She started violently at the sight of him ; but in an instant she recovered self-control, and holding out her hand, came quickly towards him.

"Thank God you have arrived !" were her first words. "I trust the worst is over. You need not fear."

"She has been *very* ill ?"

"Yes, very ill ; in danger even."

"And *you* . . . have nursed her ?"

"Oh ! I have sat with her. But now . . . you have come . . . I shall not be wanted any more."

He saw that Claire was broken down with lassitude. Her paleness frightened him ; she looked whiter than her white robe. Her eyes were so enlarged, and yet so weary, that they had become unnatural. Her hair, as he had seen at his first dim view of her, hung round her neck in unwound skeins. The habitual movement of her head was gone ; she seemed,

indeed, incapable of lifting it. It was manifest that she had passed many nights in watching.

"Yes . . . yes . . . you will be wanted," he replied. "I am certain my mother cannot do without you. How she must thank you ! And I . . . I thank you too. With all my soul I thank you." And he looked at her with such intensity and such emotion that the blood flushed, for an instant, back to her white cheeks, and she stooped her head in agitation to avoid his eager eyes.

She advanced a step, and said, "I must send for your mother's maid. She will take my place now."

"Then you have been there all night ?"

"We take it in turns," answered Claire, who in reality had kept the night - guards alone.

"Can I speak to her ?" was the next question Count Hohenwalden put.

"Of course. But she has not been clearly conscious for some days. I fear she may not know you. Ah, here is my aunt ; she will go in with you."

Harriet Brandon entered, looked astonished at finding them together, and after inquiring

how the night had passed, accompanied Count Hohenwalden to the bedside, and drew back a curtain.

The Countess opened her eyes, saw her son, and smiled to him.

He leaned over her, put his hand upon her cheek, and whispered, "Dearest mother."

Then Harriet Brandon told him, in a low voice, the details of the illness; explained how it had come about that she was in that room, and added, in reply to his inquiries, that Claire almost alone had nursed her.

The doctor expressed that morning a fairly hopeful opinion. He told Count Hohenwalden there was a slight improvement, and that, if no complications arose, he counted on a steady recovery. He went on to say that Miss Claire Brandon's nursing had been of the highest use, and that it was much to be desired that her strength should permit her to continue it.

When Claire awoke in the afternoon, after a heavy sleep, she asked herself (in ignorance of what the doctor had said about her) whether the arrival of Count Hohenwalden, which meant, of course, his frequent presence at the side of the sick-bed, ought to modify

her conduct towards his mother ; and whether she could, without either impropriety or danger to her own heart, go on with the work she had been performing ? She felt neither awkwardness nor scruple in meeting him, for she knew nothing of the motives which had taken him away from Ems ; but still, was it right and prudent to pass her time with him under the singular conditions of intimacy which presented themselves ? She still believed she could guard her heart in safety—she trusted to her will for that ; and yet she could not blind herself to the risk of the experiment. And the risk appeared to her the more real because of the look Count Hohenwalden had fixed upon her that morning—a look which she had been unable to face calmly, and the renewal of which would, she felt, move her deeply. As she thought over all this, her aunt came in to ask how she was ; and finding she was much refreshed by her long sleep, repeated to her what the doctor had said about the desirableness of her continuing her care in the sick-room.

It seemed to Claire that this opinion decided the question. If her services were

really so useful, she had no right to withdraw them merely to satisfy a personal hesitation. She would have liked to consult her aunt; but that was impossible, because to do so completely it would be necessary to explain her feelings about Count Hohenwalden. Furthermore, it was evident that her aunt (from what she had just said) saw no unfitness in her remaining at the bedside with him. So she resolved to make no change, and to go on with her nursing, simply and naturally, without any reference to the presence or absence of Count Hohenwalden.

On entering the room, about six in the evening, she found him sitting there. He came to meet her; expressed hope that she was not too much fatigued, and thanked her again, warmly and earnestly, for all that she had done. Then they both sat down opposite each other, and remained silent.

It was the purpose of Claire to look and feel indifferent; and, in her pride of will, she did not doubt that she could carry out her purpose. Yet she perceived at once that she was not indifferent, and that she had not the strength to be so. There, in

front of her, close to her, was the man who had aroused a preference in her heart. And there, between them, lay his mother, scarcely conscious, gravely ill, seeming in Claire's fancy to create an extraordinary tie between them. Claire asked herself almost at once how she could have been so senseless as to suppose that indifference was attainable in such a situation. She longed to be away—to be anywhere but there; but she felt chained, incapable of movement. She knew, as the minutes passed, that she was losing self-possession. She made a resolute attempt to regain it, and for a while she thought it was returning to her. Then, abruptly, it was gone again, and she found that her whole nature was filled nervously with disquiet. She tried, in order to conceal her agitation, to speak some words—no matter what, no matter how unimportant or how meaningless—but no words came. In her confusion she glanced hastily at Count Hohenwalden, and saw, with throbbing, that his eyes were fixed intently on her, fixed with an expression she could not define. She yearned to understand what that expression meant, yet for the moment

she was unable to repeat her glance ; she could not—dared not. But though she saw no more, she had the instinctive consciousness that his look did not leave her, that it rested unchangingly on her, and the intuition of its persistence and duration enervated and almost paralysed her. It seemed to her that she could not bear it. The strain upon her became intense. For the first time she felt she had no faculty of combat. The sensation of impotence was upon her.

Suddenly, without any preparation—she could not tell why or how—she was aware that she had lifted up her head again, as if with strength and courage, and was looking at him straight and full. Their eyes met in a deep gaze. It lasted but the beating of a pulse, yet it made Claire quiver ! That gaze told each of them the truth about themselves. Instantly in both of them the struggle to preserve freedom ceased. Instantly they both discerned that resistance was at an end. Instantly they comprehended that they had given way, and that the first glow of love, irresistible and all-dominating, had seized their hearts.

Count Hohenwalden became very pale.

There was no sound but the deep breathing of his mother—of the unseeing, unknowing witness of this scene.

A great blush spread over the cheeks of Claire.

A minute passed. Then their eyes met once more, in a second look that was longer and even more full of language than the first. And Claire rose, with a great effort, and slowly, gravely, tremblingly, left the room.

Count Hohenwalden stood up as she left. His eyes followed her to the door.

Those looks had been, on both sides, an avowal. He could no more doubt their meaning on the part of Claire than he could blind himself to their signification on his own part. They had proclaimed to each of them that the other loved. But there was, alas! between them an immense difference; if Claire was free to give her love, he, on the contrary, had promised to withhold his own. He had assured his mother that he did not, would not, love Claire. He had left Ems to prove the sincerity of that declaration, to avoid all further temptation from her. It seemed to him that he had

entered into an engagement with his mother. Yet, already, on the first day of his return, he had broken that engagement. What made the situation even worse was that, in his mother's condition, he could not tell her of it; she must remain in ignorance of what had happened until she was strong enough to hear it. Meanwhile, he would have the consciousness that he was deceiving her, that he was unfaithful to the half promise he had made her. Then came revulsion the other way.

“But is it true,” he asked himself, “that I am, in reality, to blame? Have I not done my best and utmost duty to my mother? I went, honestly, away to avoid all this. And yet I am dragged here again by circumstances so special and so strange that a Roman would see in them an augury. Fate has been stronger than my purpose, stronger than my determination to satisfy my mother. I have been brought back to Claire Brandon under conditions of such a nature that my will cannot stand up against them. It may be that, a week ago, I did not love her; but I know that, to-day, I do love her. I cannot doubt—those

looks were proof—that she loves me. My mother must give way; I yielded at the beginning; it is her turn now. Events are stronger than her dogmas about birth; dogmas must yield to events. She will take account too, I am sure, of the deep affection she bears to me and of her desire for my happiness. Claire Brandon is of gentle blood; if she is not exactly noble, what does that matter? In all else she is, indeed, incomparable. Surely there cannot be in Europe another girl so admirable as she. No, no—my mother must give way. But will she give way?” In his heart he knew that she never gave way. Yet he went on, “When shall I find occasion to speak out to Claire? When shall I be able to tell her all that she has made me feel? I have to say to her that, in these few days we have passed together—especially to-day—I have learnt to love her with my whole soul. Oh, when shall I have the delight of being alone with her? When shall I be alone to gaze at her; alone, to pour out my flood of tenderness and gratitude?”

Then his mother moved, and, in a low voice, murmured, “Conrad.”

He bent over her and answered, "Dearest mother, I am with you."

"Yes—yes," she answered. "I have been very ill. I can scarcely think. Very ill. That girl has been so good to me. A daughter could not have been more devoted."

Count Hohenwalden asked himself, with bewilderment, "Is this an answer to my thoughts? Is fate thrusting in its hand in this as in all the rest? Is my mother changed?"

"I am better, Conrad," continued his mother. "Not so weak. But my head, my head. Where is she? Oh, Conrad, how her gentle hand has soothed me!"

Count Hohenwalden listened with delight. It seemed as if his mother was encouraging his dreams.

At dinner he saw Claire. But as Madame de Rochedure and some others were in the same room, he did not venture to approach the Brandons. The Marquise called him, made a place for him at her table, and began, at once, her usual outpour.

"Well, Count," she said, "as your mother was, thank God, so really better this afternoon, we can allow ourselves to talk of the emotions

of the past week. We all have been horribly pained, and very full of sympathy. As for Claire, she has performed the part of guardian angel, amidst the hosannas of admiring crowds. Nothing of the sort has happened in the valley of the Lahn before; and as this place has never owned a tutelary goddess, or even a patron saint, I propose that we should all subscribe to set up an altar to her, with a votive inscription in Latin. For an entire week she has not once shown herself out of doors. The gallery has wept for her. I wonder whether she would treat me in the same fashion, if I stumbled into illness."

Count Hohenwalden was offended by this careless talk; but he dared not show that it annoyed him. He answered, simply, "Miss Claire Brandon has been most kind, most devoted. My mother is profoundly grateful, and has spoken to me in warm words of the untiring attention she has shown her."

"Untiring—yes; you may well use that word. Do you know that she has watched for seven nights? None of us could comprehend how such a delicate, fragile girl could stand it. She looks pulled down; but not so much as I

expected. We—monsters that we are—went on dancing while poor Claire was pouring out medicines and smoothing pillows. We said we were very sorry—and, in all truth, we were—but we amused ourselves all the same. Such is life. We missed Claire very much. Do you know, Count, that she is a very remarkable person?” And she fixed her eyes on him as she spoke.

Count Hohenwalden was not always master of his face. A movement passed over it. It lasted only two seconds; but Madame de Rochedure was lying in wait for it and caught it.

“Hum, hum,” she said to herself; “the Countess has lost the game after all, I verily believe. How diverting it will be to contemplate the working out of this! If I can help Claire, I will—I really will. She is a rare girl, and merits a good husband—if there be such a thing on earth.”

When, at last, the dinner was over—it seemed odiously long to Count Hohenwalden—he was able, without indiscretion, to walk to the Brandons’ table.

Claire received him with a calm smile, a

smile so carefully prepared beforehand that no one but himself could see in it a purport. To him it brought an echo and a memory. That look was in it—at the bottom.

The words they spoke were insignificant; and yet it seemed, to both of them, that their very emptiness had meaning.

Madame de Rochedure watched them from a little distance; but even she, with all her perspicacity, could not detect a suspicious symptom in their attitude towards each other.

Then they went up-stairs again, and Claire made preparations for the night. Count Hohenwalden longed to keep watch with her, but he did not dare to propose such an arrangement. He did obtain, however, that, as there was progress in his mother's state, Claire would divide the night with Berthe, and would begin to take the rest she so much needed.

Next morning the improvement continued. Claire, too, was much less fatigued. She consented, at her aunt's urgent request, to go out. Count Hohenwalden followed her; but, to his extreme vexation and disappointment, he was unable to speak to her alone. She was received with acclamation by all her acquaint-

ances ; a circle was formed round her ; everybody sought to talk to her, and to pay her compliments on the devotedness and the success of her nursing.

In the afternoon the opportunity arrived. Harriet Brandon was very anxious, after Claire's long imprisonment indoors, to keep her in the open air as much as possible. She insisted, therefore, that as Countess Hohenwalden did not need her for the moment, they should go for a stroll up the river. Princess Mohileff and Count Conrad joined them. After a while the two elder ladies sat down beneath the trees along the water's edge, and the Princess asked Claire to look for flowers for her in the copses. It was but natural that the Count should accompany her.

They walked on in silence, slowly, side by side. They both were deeply agitated. Claire felt as if she could not breathe. The moments seemed to them like time.

At last they were alone, with nothing round them but sky, and grass, and leaves, and branches, and the singing of the birds. And then he said, still walking slowly, " I thanked

you yesterday. I thank you again now. You have helped to save my mother's life. She has said to me that you have behaved to her as a daughter. For that I never can repay you. And yet that debt, vast as it is, forms but a small part—a small part indeed—of what I owe to you. As a son, you have filled me with deep gratitude. . . . As a man, you have filled me with deep love.”

Clare started, stopped. . . . She clasped her hands, unknowingly, in the intensity of her emotion. . . . Tears filled her eyes. . . . She expected that those words were coming, and yet, when they were spoken, they overwhelmed her.

They stood still.

He spoke again. “The love I have for you has come quickly. A few days—a few hours, I might say—have seen it born and grow. I bring it to you in its beginnings, in the freshness of its bloom. But I bring it to you for always; for life and age; for the years until the end; for our companion in joy and our solace in pain. . . . Twice you have looked at me as if you accepted it. Twice I have believed your eyes . . . and hoped. Tell

me, Claire, that you do accept it. Tell me that you give to me the love I give to you."

Clare did not hesitate. She was ready to reply. And yet she could not, for the instant, lift up her head and look at him. It hung down instinctively. With a low voice, simply, smiling gently, she replied—"I accept your love with pride and honour—with my whole trust and certainty. I give you my love with my whole faith and truth. Indeed—indeed I love you. I love you because I know you are worthy." And she held out her two hands to him and whispered with uncontrollable tenderness, leaning towards him, "Conrad . . . Conrad . . . I love you. Say again . . . again . . . again . . . that you love me."

They sat upon a fallen tree, and held each other's hands, and looked in each other's eyes, and spoke in low tones to each other; and as they looked and spoke, their lips grew near and came together, and Claire knew the ecstasy of the first caress.

And then, emboldened but yet timid, she laid her head shrinkingly upon his shoulder and said, "Conrad, my master, my love, I bring to you an unlearned heart—a heart that

has known no instruction ; but a heart that has longed to love, and has found in you its sovereign. I throw myself at your feet to learn to love."

He put his arms around her, and held her to him. "You wish to learn to love, Claire," he answered, smiling to her ; "then look at the sunny scene of our betrothal, and take from it your first teaching. Look at the glowing brightness of the day, and at the colours of the flowers ; listen to the rustling of the leaves and the carol of the birds ; breathe the sweet perfumes of the summer air ; hearken to the joyous song of Nature, and gaze upon the inspiring beauty of her work. And then, sweet Claire, remember ever that Nature, who is love, looked on us and rejoiced when we told our love to each other, and to her."

"What a radiant omen for our love !" sighed Claire. "What a tender and undying witness of its birth ! How gloriously privileged we are, Conrad, to tell each other our avowal in the presence of such a confidant ! Look ! . . . feel ! . . . She casts over us the protection of her royalty, the grace of her simplicity, the eternity of her fidelity. In

our hours of trial we will remind each other of this enchanting scene, of this incomparable moment, and we will find encouragement and fortitude in the memory of our beginning. Tell me, Conrad, can we love more than this ? ”

“ Ah, dearest, that would seem impossible ! And yet the poets tell us that love grows with its own delight.”

“ Grows ? Can this prodigious feeling grow ? But, if it grows, it must become awful in its might ! . . . Conrad, I must tell my aunt at once.”

“ Not yet, sweet child, I beg you. My mother and your aunt have equal rights. It is our duty to let them know together. The condition of my mother will render it impossible for us to tell her anything for some days. We must commence our love, alas ! by the pain of waiting to declare it.”

“ But every one will see it, Conrad. I shall be unable to conceal it. I feel that it rushes out of me. How can I hold it back and hide it ? My Conrad, I need to shout it to the sky, to call the sun to share in my delight, to cry out, ‘ Flowers, streams, I love Conrad !

Come . . . all of you . . . love him with me !' I long to talk to the air of *you*. Hide it, Conrad ! Must I ? Can I ? My poor will, that I used in my ignorance to think so strong, will not be strong enough for that."

He looked at her with passion, and . . .

Suddenly there were voices near them, calling, "Claire, Claire, where are you ? Count Hohenwalden, are you lost ?"

They sprang up, frightened, almost with a sense of guilt. They stood apart. Claire, in her confusion, stooped among the grass, as if she sought for something. Conrad, after the first second, faced the danger. As he turned in the direction of the voices, he heard again the words, "Count Hohenwalden, are you lost ?"

A smile came over him. "Lost !" he said in his heart. "No, not lost. I have found more than I ever looked for."

CHAPTER XV.

“WE were obeying orders and were seeking for wild flowers,” explained Count Hohenwalden, when he found himself in sight of Princess Mohileff and Harriet Brandon. “But as we did not discover any, we wandered rather far. And we forgot that time was passing.”

Then Claire came up, very flushed and very conscious, with three daisies she had that instant picked, saying, culpably, “This is all I have found.”

The two old ladies looked suspiciously from one of them to the other. But, for the moment, they made no remarks, and the walk home commenced.

Claire went on in front with Princess Mohileff, who observed, to try the ground,—
“It is a pity wild flowers are so scarce here,

for I am sure it would have been very agreeable to you to carry some to Countess Hohenwalden."

"Wild flowers fade so soon," replied Claire, making a great effort to listen and understand, "that they are not fit ornaments for a sick-room. Cultivated flowers are much better representatives of the hope that ought to cheer a bedside."

"I do not admit that at all. Hope is so utterly unsubstantial and so flitting, that short-lived wild flowers are excellent emblems of it. We all know that 'hope is often nothing more than the deferring of disappointment.'"

Claire was in no mood to listen to such theories. In her excited state, hope was simply the expectation of a certainty. Besides, it was odious to her to talk at all. If she could not be alone with Conrad, she wished to be alone without him, and to repeat to herself, with ecstasy, the words he had spoken to her. So she answered, with a slight tinge of impatience, "It seems to me I could not live if I lost my faith in hope."

"Well, when you reach my age," was the

answer, "it will be less necessary to you. I get on very well without it. I fancy, even, that the absence of it has advantages. For instance, it enables me to entertain a sympathy for evanescent wild flowers which—judging from your non-success in finding them—you evidently do not share."

As she said this, she laughed and turned her eyes maliciously to Claire.

Claire coloured deeply, and appeared so uncomfortable that Princess Mohileff had no doubts left, and added, laughing more and more, "Poor wild flowers! The next time I intrust to you the task of hunting for them, I shall stipulate that Count Hohenwalden shall not assist you in the search."

On reaching the hotel, the Brandons went at once to see Countess Hohenwalden. The improvement was continuing; there appeared to be no further cause for anxiety. The Countess insisted, even, that as she was so much better, Claire should not watch any more at night.

Then Harriet Brandon accompanied Claire to her room, and directly the door was closed, asked her, with a nervousness and an excita-

bility which were in marked contrast to her habitual tenderness,—“What were you doing with Count Hohenwalden? What is the meaning of the flutter and agitation in which we found you both? I trust there is no love in the matter, Claire?”

Claire turned round and looked at her aunt with deep surprise. That she should show disapproval—and, most certainly, she did show it by her words and manner—of the growing intimacy between herself and Count Hohenwalden, appeared not only incomprehensible, but unkind. Of course, in compliance with Conrad's wish, Claire could say nothing positive to her aunt; but her aunt suspected the truth, and her suspicions manifestly pained her instead of delighting her. What could be the reason of that? What possible motive could her aunt have for feeling dissatisfaction?

So Claire looked at her interrogatively, and answered, with hesitation and perplexity—“But, Tante, if I were to fall in love with Count Hohenwalden, would you not be very glad? I think we like each other . . . a good deal. In fact . . . I am sure we do.

I have not spoken to you about it because . . . even with you . . . even with you, who know all that my heart and head have ever felt, I feel . . . a sort of shyness . . . in talking about the commencement of what may be love."

Claire took her aunt's head in her two hands and kissed her several times; and then she looked again at her, and saw with astonishment and growing pain that the expression of her face was anxious, apprehensive, almost gloomy.

She stepped backwards—to see better. She fixed her eyes upon her aunt. Memories of the scenes in Venice and in London rushed violently before her. Involuntarily, instinctively, she asked herself,—“Is there a connection between my aunt's conduct then and her conduct now?”

This seemed to her absurd. What relation could there be between the fact that she had not inherited the family estate and the possibility of her marriage with Count Hohenwalden? He loved her for herself—not for money. No, the explanation could not lie there. Possibly her aunt, in the intensity of

her affection, shrank from the idea of separation from her, and, for that reason, looked on her marriage with repugnance. Yes, that was it, there could be nothing else.

In that conviction she sat down by her aunt, and fondled her, and whispered,—“Sweet Tatte, if I married, nothing would be changed between you and me. Surely you know that. And surely, also, you cannot judge that Count Hohenwalden would not be, in every respect, a good husband for me. If he asked me to be his wife, I should consent with deep delight—unless, which seems to me impossible, you saw good reasons for refusing.”

As Claire said this she closely watched her aunt. She noticed, with distress, that the expression of anxiety remained unchanged, and—a detail which seemed inexplicable—that her eyes rested fixedly upon the ground, and never turned towards Claire.

Suddenly, with an outburst of the old impetuosity, Claire sprang to her feet, stood out before her aunt, and exclaimed, “Tatte! I do not understand you.”

Still, in spite of this appeal, her aunt did

not look at her. She replied, however, after some moments, "I mean that . . . are you quite sure you would be happy with him?"

"Oh, if that is all you mean, Tatte, I am ready to run the risk. But is that all?"

"Well . . . no . . . because . . . you have heard his mother talk of birth, and . . ."

"Talk of birth!" interrupted Claire. "Talk of birth! Am I not what she calls 'born'? The Brandons are an ancient race. It is true that we have no nobility, in the Continental sense, because we have no title; but Countess Hohenwalden is sufficiently acquainted with England and the English to be perfectly aware that an old county family, like ours, is worthy to be called 'born.' You told her who we are. I repeat, Tatte, that, if that is all, I am ready, for that also, to run the risk."

"But . . . Claire . . . but . . . is anything settled? It is so sudden. You know him so little."

"As soon as anything is settled, Tatte, I shall expect you to be enthusiastic. I do not hide from you," she added, with a smile, "that matters are progressing. This afternoon, I was

very happy with him—oh, so happy! I do believe I shall soon be able to throw myself into your arms and to tell you that it is done.”

Harriet Brandon remained unmoved. She went on staring at the ground. Then she rose, kissed Claire sadly, and left the room.

Claire looked after her, as she went, and murmured, “What can it mean? It cannot be the secret—if there is one. That is impossible. It is something else this time. But why is my aunt so worried? Why does she make mysteries with me? That is not her nature.”

She wondered. And notwithstanding all the love that filled her, for a moment she was not content. It seemed to her that something must be wrong. Under ordinary circumstances the question would have absorbed her; but, with all its interest and its strangeness, it could not hold its ground against the other thoughts which swayed her then. She tried to follow it, but it ebbed away from her; it disappeared; and, in its place, love surged up within her, passionately, tumultuously. Love would not be held back; it would admit no rival; all else was swept away by its uprising inrush. Tremblingly, fervidly, she forgot the

world, and opened out her soul to it. She was alone—alone with love, with joy, with rapture. Naught else existed.

“Love, take me, hold me, keep me!” she cried, aloud. “Love, teach me to love him, as he merits love. Love, unfold to me your ways, your secrets. Love, show me how to breathe for him, how to put in action, for his service, every faculty within me. Guide me; prepare me; instruct me; fit me to be his helpmate. Alas! I am so little worthy. Love, light me; raise me; regenerate me. Your power knows no boundary; your force knows no measure; your will knows no impediment;—oh, love, employ them all for me, in the utmost fulness of their might, and lift me up to him! Oh, what a height to reach! My Conrad, hold out your arms to me; help love to succour me and to enable me to deserve you. Oh, may every strength within me aid me now! Come into my spirit, Conrad; implant your soul in mine; and—oh, Conrad, Conrad, love me!”

And then, almost exhausted by emotion, she sat down, leaned back her head and closed her eyes. With a smile upon her face that it

had not known before, she rested there and dreamed of love.

While Claire was passing through these agitations, Count Hohenwalden, too, was thinking of his love, and also, somewhat uneasily, of the arguments he should lay before his mother when she had sufficiently recovered. He told himself that, after the events of the past week, Claire stood in a very different situation from that which she had occupied when he had assured his mother he did not think of marrying her. His mother had accepted her devoted care, had learnt to know her merit, had even spoken of her conduct as being worthy of a daughter. That changed the whole position, and rendered it impossible that his mother could continue to resist. Still, he had strong doubts. On the question of birth he knew that she was beyond influence or reason. She was as immovable as space. Never would she change her principles. At the very utmost he could only hope that, out of love for him and out of gratitude to Claire, she would refrain from saying no.

At dinner Madame de Rochedure sat at the

next table to Claire, and scrutinised her carefully. Count Hohenwalden had not come in. The Marquise had already extracted from Princess Mohileff the story of the wild flowers, was sure that the love-making was progressing fast, and was determined to help it on. Still, although she was perfectly convinced, it amused her to watch in person. She saw that Harriet Brandon was preoccupied, and that Claire was timid and turned her eyes away from every one who looked at her. So she said to herself, "When Hohenwalden comes, I must observe the manner of their meeting. It will be of no use to examine their faces; they will arrange them beforehand. But it will not occur to them to stifle the tale-telling of their hands; they will think themselves in safety there; and that is where I shall detect their secret. When he appears I will watch their fingers—not their features."

Soon afterwards Count Hohenwalden entered. He nodded to the men he knew; bowed to the women; shook hands with a few; and at last went up to the Brandons' table and held out his hand to Claire. The Marquise fixed her eyes intently on the movement. She saw

the two hands meet in eager outstretching ; she saw the closing in of the fingers in sweet contact ; she saw the quick compression of the skin and the contraction of the muscles of the wrist ; she saw Claire's transparent nails grow scarlet as the blood was forced into them by pressure ; and, as the hands parted, lingeringly, after an interlacing that had been prolonged beyond habitual usage, she noticed the white marks left on them for an instant where the hold had been. And she said to herself, with immense amusement, "That means they are engaged. Ah, Claire, you think you can hide your doings from such a spy as I am !"

A quarter of an hour afterwards she called to Claire, "I intend to get up a drive to Nassau, and I want you to come with me. When do you think you can leave your patient for an afternoon ?"

"Oh, in a day or two, I hope. She is getting better very fast."

"Then let me know. We may as well take a couple of men with us, and, if you approve, I will ask Count Hohenwalden and the Russian general."

Claire coloured slightly (she was annoyed to

feel that she was beginning to blush frequently), and answered, "I shall be glad to join you. I want to see the Schloss. I am going up to the Countess now, and shall remain with her. She will not let me sit up any more, so I must give her all the care I can during the day and evening."

Count Hohenwalden joined her in his mother's room. They could not speak, but, in the silence and the feeble light, they had the joy of hidden glances and furtive smiles, and they were deeply happy.

At last the moment came to say good night ; and then the joining of the hands was fervid, close, and long ; and the gazing of the earnest eyes spoke almost more than words.

Claire went to her room, and was alone once more — alone with her ardour and her hope. She flung herself upon her knees, and her overflowing heart poured out its thanksgiving. She prayed to be rendered worthy ; that was her burning wish. The efforts she had made to raise herself in will, in reason, in preparation for the fight of life, appeared to her, from her new standpoint, to have been utterly unproductive. Her sense of her insufficiency was

almost as boundless as her gratitude for the joy that had burst upon her. It seemed to her, in her excitement, that each moment added to the vastness of her love, to the exultation of her rejoicing, to the conviction of her incompetence. She entered upon love as if it were a priesthood ; as if she were called to minister to a faith. All the intensities of her nature flashed forth within her. And again, and again, she repeated, in passionate supplication, "O God, make me less unworthy of this glorious privilege !"

Then, suddenly, came into her an immense longing to tell her aunt. It seemed to her that her delight, vast as it already was, would not be quite complete until she shared it fully with her aunt, and her eager spirit pictured to her the scene when, at last, she could pour out her heart's tale.

But as soon as her thoughts turned in this direction, the remembrance came rushing back to her of the strange hesitation her aunt had shown that afternoon. That hesitation appeared more and more inexplicable, more and more in contradiction with the whole attitude of her aunt towards her, more and more un-

natural and painful. It seemed to her, in her perplexity, that there must assuredly be some relation between the secret she imagined her aunt was keeping from her and this extraordinary conduct. For a moment she fancied she could not go on in such uncertainty, and that she must press her aunt next morning for a complete explanation. But, almost instantly, she turned again and told herself it would be unworthy to permit that idea to get any hold of her. She had, voluntarily, promised her aunt to ask no questions; she had bargained with herself that she would bear her doubts in silence; it was her duty to carry out those pledges; of what value would be her will, if, after so long a struggle, it failed her then? And, again: was that the moment to be impatient? Was that the moment to mistrust her aunt? Would she not be doubly ungrateful—to Providence and to her aunt—if, when love had come to her so gloriously, so overwhelmingly, she were, suddenly, to seek to satisfy a curiosity she had withstood for years, and to cease to respect the silence which, for some motive, her aunt thought fit to maintain towards her? No—most positively, she would

not give way. She would continue mistress of herself. Her aunt's hesitation about the marriage would disappear directly she knew the truth, and her own great gladness would become common to them both.

And then, after this momentary argument with herself, she turned again to love, and found that love and prayer were one. She recognised, as a bright omen, that her love seemed nobler, grander, higher, when she cast herself upon her knees to supplicate for grace and guidance, than even when she gazed in Conrad's eyes and drank in joy. Her nature, notwithstanding its valiancy, was so purely and so gently feminine, that trust and faith were inherent parts of it. She united all her beliefs in one same feeling of gratitude, of hope, of adoration. She found—as other loving hearts had found before her—that in the incapacity of her intelligence to distinguish between the human and the divine, she mixed them unknowingly into one.

With her hands joined in worship, and her lips parted in prayer, she fell asleep.

Next morning she went out for air, and, in the gardens, joined the group of friends.

Count Hohenwalden was not with them.

Madame de Rochedure cried out, as she came up, "Do you believe in chance, Claire?"

"Believe in it? . . . No. I do not deny that it has an apparent existence, but certainly I do not accept it as an article of faith. Furthermore, it is a tangled subject, on which I should have to make all sorts of reservations. Consequently, I think I will say nothing about it."

"Coward!" exclaimed the Marquise. "What would become of conversation if everybody were as odiously prudent as you are, and if no one spoke without mature reflection? Why, the most glorious merit of talk is, precisely, that it excites us, by its bounding free-play, to illuminations and extravagances of idea which we are incapable of attaining by cold unstimulated thought."

"It seems to me," put in the Russian general, "that, if I were allowed to speak, I could define chance without falling into extravagance."

"Then, speak. Define it," cried Madame de Rochedure.

"Chance," was the reply, "is the unknown agent that brings about events which we can trace to no apparent cause."

"Tolerably correct, General," went on the Marquise ; "but incomplete—very incomplete. Not only is there no apparent cause in the work of chance, but, to make chance quite perfect, the work itself must be of such a kind that no cause could influence it."

"Say that again, please," asked Claire. "I have lost my way over the last half of that sentence. It is impossible there can be results which no guiding cause could influence."

"Indeed!" answered the Marquise, mockingly. "I imagined your exploring mind had attained loftier heights than that. Will you be so gracious as to inform me what guiding cause can influence the drawing of a prize in a lottery or the killing by lightning of one particular man out of a group of twenty?"

"You are right again, Marquise. You are always right," exclaimed the General, with admiring enthusiasm.

"I acknowledge, Jeanne," said Claire, laughing, "that you have beaten me. Yet, really, the examples you have just put forward are of a very special kind and . . ."

"Special or not," interrupted Madame de Rochedure, "they suffice to upset your rash

assertion that all results whatever are susceptible of being influenced by some guiding cause. My two specimens — and I daresay I could discover some more like them if I searched—lie outside all reasons why. But I will be honest enough to admit that a great many of the performances of what we call chance are, after all, explainable by indirect occasionings which, though we are unable to discern their operation, are, at all events, imaginable, and that, therefore, what I called just now ‘perfect chance’ is very rare. In most cases chance does seem to use more or less comprehensible processes of action.”

“When I was a boy,” observed the Italian colonel, “I lost a knife in a wood, and found it four years afterwards. I found it because it was there. That was an example of a ‘comprehensible process of action.’”

“I am not like Miss Claire Brandon,” said Princess Mohileff, “for I believe in chance with all my heart. Chance is, indeed, one of my comforters and cheerers. Life would be even more hopeless than it is if there were no chance. It is by chance alone that we achieve the impossible. Without it, with nothing but our

wills to aid us, we could only reach the possible. If forces are to be measured by the results they produce, chance is, consequently, a far higher lever than will."

"No, no, no!" exclaimed Claire. "I protest absolutely against that monstrous dogma. If chance exists at all, it is a blind unconscious agent, scarcely ever to be met with when it is wanted, producing results without intention—and you call that 'high,' Princess!"

"It is really foolish of you, my dear Claire," insisted Madame de Rochedure, "to persist in being so good. It is not intelligent to be good. It would be far more in harmony with the brightness of your mind to allow a little wickedness to creep into it. Begin the change, I entreat you, by abandoning the schoolroom story of 'beneficent Providence,' and by accepting chance as a reality."

"By all means, Miss Brandon, follow the advice of the Marquise," went on Princess Mohileff. "Providence is only beneficent so long as it brings about what pleases us. It ceases to be beneficent directly it is disagreeable. I should be so glad to make a convert of you to my Gospel of the Divinity of Chance."

“Besides, Claire,” said Madame de Rochedure, more gravely, “it is never wise to speak ill of what we may need. Who knows whether, some day, chance will not act in your behalf and effect for you what you may be powerless to do for yourself?”

“I do not speak ill of chance,” cried Claire. “I class it amongst constituted authorities, and as such I honour it. But I honour it passively, not actively. And particularly, I do not believe in it. I believe in other powers because I can appeal to them. But I cannot appeal to chance.”

“Well, I say again, do not disdain it, with your superb notions of what ought to be. What ought to be, is usually a bore. Besides, why do you pretend that you know what ought to be any better than I do? That is pure prejudice, Claire, and prejudice is unworthy of you. And that reminds me that, before you came up, we were continuing the dispute of the other day about prejudice. It was prejudice that led us on to chance. The Colonel pretended that, as prejudice is as old as earthquakes, it is, on account of its antiquity, respectable, and that, for that reason, I have no right to attack

it. As if everything ancient were respectable ! I maintain that, on the contrary, the past was far less respectable than the present. I once heard a series of lectures on prejudice—that is why I know so much about it. That delightful professor we all went to listen to at the Sorbonne explained it to us. He told us, amongst other examples, that, of all the forms of prejudice—and, if I remember right, he enumerated more than two hundred varieties of it—religion is the most striking, precisely because it is the most dependent on the accidents of situation. He assured us, with that wonderful insinuativeness which wound itself round our hearts (we were all women there), that there is no form of vanity more outrageous than to suppose we have a soul, and no form of selfishness more glaring than to wish to save that soul if we have one. He explained to us that what is called faith is the most adventitious and most extrinsic of all possible states of mind, which some people possess and some do not, which we are quite powerless to have or not to have, as we like. He pointed out that it depends on the hazard of individual surroundings ; that it comes to some of us and not to

others; that those who have it can rarely get rid of it, and that those who have it not can scarcely ever obtain it. And especially, he urged that it changes its shape, its character, its object, with latitude and longitude, just in the same way as patriotism, climate, and the idea of beauty change. It was his ideal of a prejudice."

Claire had listened almost with horror. In her special condition of thought, filled up as she was with excited thanksgiving and eager prayer, the discussion about chance had displeased her, and these further theories were doubly odious to her. As soon as Madame de Rochedure stopped to breathe, she asked, indignantly, "But who was responsible for exposing you to such teaching as that?"

"I myself, Claire," was the perfectly satisfied reply. "I was a free woman—that is to say, I was married and curious. The others went—a good many of them, at least—so I went too. And I rejoiced in it. It was a warming fire of intelligence. Perhaps it did shock me a little, sometimes—very little, though; and I explained that, naturally, by the action of my own latent prejudice; 'latent'

was one of the two hundred varieties. But all the professor's arguments were so 'found,' so 'lived,' as we say in Paris, they carried us so delightfully to 'the beyond,' that I was immeasurably grateful. You know, I would go anywhere for an idea."

"Anywhere!" exclaimed Claire. "You take no account, then, of the nature of the idea, and of the influence, good or bad, that it may exercise upon you?"

"Every idea has merit," went on the Marquise, "provided only it be new. And that brings back to my memory a definition of intelligence which the professor gave us. Listen, Claire; it is so perfect: 'Intelligence is the faculty of supplying ideas one's self, and of seizing rapidly and exactly the ideas of others.' The man who could say that to us was worth listening to, even if he did attack religion."

"No intelligence," asserted Claire, "can justify an attack on religion in the presence of women who are supposed to believe."

"You are really too good, Claire, as I said just now. I have heard many respectable persons—old ladies, you know, and senators,

and bishops, and that sort of thing—talk as you do. Everything you say means something, and one has to understand it—though there is not always an idea in it, which is a contradiction. You ought to be very thankful to me for all the instructive things I tell you. I perceive, with grief, that you are not.”

“I shall never be thankful to any one for shocking what you are pleased to call my ‘prejudices.’ Like Countess Hohenwalden and the Colonel, I have a reverence for certain forms of them.”

“Of course, weak creature,” laughed the Marquise; “we know what that means. You worship your own prejudices, and you despise those of others. That is either the ‘unconscious’ or the ‘disingenuous’ variety, I forget which. This is lamentable, Claire. I was positively beginning to revere you; but I perceive now that you are an impostor. You do not believe in chance, and you mix up conviction and prejudice just like an ordinary person. I shall believe next that you see no difference between will and obstinacy.”

“Perceive and believe what you like,” answered Claire, smiling. “I will do my best

to live through your scorn. I make no confusion between things that are different ; I say only that each of them has its use. It does not follow that because prejudice and obstinacy are lower conditions than conviction and will, they should therefore have no uses at all. I claim for them, on the contrary, the merits, such as they are, which are possessed by inferior organisms. You have no right to assert that a frog has no qualities, solely because a dog is a higher animal."

"Altogether superb !" cried Madame de Rochedure. "Will is canine and prejudice is batrachian ! Thank you for a new idea : that, really, is one. Or is it conviction that barks and obstinacy that croaks ? I mix it all up and lose my very way over it."

Everybody laughed—Claire more than any one.

"Yes," she said ; "I accept a dog as an emblem for will. One is as faithful as the other. I rely on will to uphold me in the difficulties of life, just as I should count upon a dog to guide me in the dark. If ever I had a real trial, I should expect will to support me through it with honour."

“And if ever I have a real trial,” replied Madame de Rochedure, “I shall run away from it with extreme simplicity. Decidedly in such a case the frog would be my model. I should leap into liquid and swim elsewhere; or else I should address a prayer to chance. But here comes Count Hohenwalden. We will see what he has to say about it all. Sit down, Count. Do you prefer a frog to prejudice, or conviction to a dog? No, that is not it. Do you put organisms above qualities, or higher animals below obstinacy? That is the right way to state it, I think. At least those are some of the words Claire has been using; and as you are rather accustomed to her way of talking, I daresay you will be able to find your road amongst them, and to comprehend what she means.”

Claire blushed at this transparent allusion; but as the whole circle was occupied in laughing at Madame de Rochedure's absurd speech, no one noticed her confusion.

Count Hohenwalden did not like the situation, but he showed no annoyance. He merely remarked—“I have the deep regret, Madame la Marquise, to be incapable of understanding

one word of what you have been pleased to say to me."

"It only means that Claire has prejudices and defends them, and that she has a will, and defends that too. Indeed, she seems to regard her will as if it were a supreme Buddha, endowed, like chance, with all the mights."

"And so it is," asserted Claire. "I should like to know what might there is within us, excepting will. Chance, for what it may be worth, is, at all events, outside us. Will, guided by reason, is the sole attribute by which we can discharge duty. My will has rendered me services already, and I count upon it for others in the future."

"Which means," went on the Marquise, "that in your own opinion you are stiff-necked, headstrong, inexorable, obdurate, and stubborn. Now, frankly, I never thought all that of you. And you, Count, have you perceived those adjectives in Miss Claire Brandon's character?"

Count Hohenwalden bit his lips with anger, but he kept his temper. He answered, quietly—"No, madame; I have not perceived them."

"Yet she herself has just proclaimed that

they belong to her," insisted Madame de Rochedure.

"You are quite mad this morning, Jeanne," remonstrated Claire, half vexed, half laughing. "I shall not stop here if you persist in attacking me in this fashion."

"I attack you? What horrible ingratitude! Why, I revere you so profoundly that my one ambition is to imitate you! My sole object is to get to know your nature with such precision that I can make myself a copy of you. It is my dream to become so absolutely like you that I shall fall inevitably in love with the same man as you."

"This is too abominable," exclaimed Claire, rising, but still laughing, as all the others did. "I will go. Besides, it is time for me to return to Madame de Hohenwalden."

"Then, with your permission, mademoiselle," said Conrad, "I will accompany you to my mother's room."

As soon as they were out of hearing, Conrad whispered hastily—"I can say nothing to you. Too many eyes are upon us here. Can we not manage to be alone somewhere for five minutes? That chattering woman will, at all events,

render us the service of taking us to Nassau, and then, I trust, we shall find an opportunity. But, before that, will it be impossible for me to speak to you? I have such love to tell to you."

"And I!—and I!" murmured Claire, looking downwards as she walked, imagining that every passer-by could read her thoughts, and fearing to encounter looks and smiles. "And I, my Conrad! Oh, if we could but be alone! But how? And where? This constant restraint is cruel. I do so long to tell my aunt."

Then they got into the street, and were forced to put an end even to the broken words they had been exchanging.

CHAPTER XVI.

IN the afternoon Harriet Brandon and Princess Mohileff were sitting together in the gallery.

“Count Hohenwalden is a notable person,” observed the Princess. “He is guided by ideas that are rarely found amongst his kindred. His Liberalism is so real that he applies it to his own acts as well as to politics ; and that is the most certain of all possible tests. He must have great quarrels with his mother about it all.”

“I daresay,” replied Harriet Brandon, trying to appear indifferent ; “yes, I daresay.”

Princess Mohileff continued,—“I told you when you arrived here what Countess Hohenwalden is. But, if I remember rightly, I did not go into any details. Now that you know her, it may interest you to hear more of her. As I have met her in many places for more than

thirty years, and as I have often talked with her of the one subject near her heart, I can tell you a good deal about her."

"But," interrupted Harriet Brandon, "she does not interest me very much. Claire sees more in her than I do."

"Why, she is a type," exclaimed the Princess; "a type altogether apart. How can you say she does not interest you? She is alone of her species. There are, of course, other women who attach high value to birth; but, so far as my enlightenment extends—and I have been about a good deal—she is the only woman of our time who sees in it a divine essence."

"I have heard her views of it," said Harriet Brandon.

"Yes; but however much or however often she may have expressed her opinions to you—and I daresay she has done so at least once each day, excepting when she was in bed unconscious—I am certain she has never conveyed to you a true appreciation of the effects which have been produced in her by her convictions. I do not exaggerate when I say that she would commit any ingratitude, any

abomination, any cruelty, to defend the honour of her name, as she understands it. She is a true woman; she has many admirable qualities; she is passionately attached to her son; yet, I should be quite disposed to admit that she would wish him dead rather than he should do anything to disgrace himself in her eyes."

"What a horrible character!" exclaimed Harriet Brandon, with as much unconcern as she could assume. She was beginning to suspect that the Princess was saying all this with an object—in reference, probably, to what had occurred the day before about the wild flowers—and she was determined to show that she did not understand.

"As regards marriage, for instance," went on the Princess, looking rather steadily at Miss Brandon, "she would be absolutely merciless."

"It must be very annoying to her son," was the reply, "to be held down in such a manner."

"Ah! there precisely is the difficulty," observed the Princess. "Conrad is not held down at all. There never was a more independent nature than his. He is tenderly fond

of his mother, and he has always sought to give her every satisfaction that he could fit in with his own opinions. But if a disaccord did arise—a serious disaccord, I mean, on a serious subject—it is he, not she, who would decide. And then she would lose her head with anger, and uncomfortable consequences would ensue. No reason would ever touch her on a question which bore in any way on the glory of the Hohenwaldens.”

“But are they really such very great people?” asked Harriet Brandon, in order to say something.

“Most certainly they are. They unite all the conditions which make great people. They are an ancient race, a legendary race even; a race of warriors and of statesmen. Their name has been written by their sword-points on every page of the history of Austria. Their alliances are very eminent and very widespread. The honour of quartering their arms is highly valued in Central Europe. They are not as rich as they were; but they own broad unproductive lands, and venerable uninhabitable castles. They are still nominally lords of more than forty districts—the Countess has

enumerated them to me. This Count Conrad is not particularly rich; he belongs to a younger branch of the house; but I fancy he is fairly well off. Yes, positively, they are great people."

"Well, however great they may be in Austria, they cannot carry their greatness about with them in unimpaired majesty. Rank is so essentially local in effect and value; family dignity and family position depend so entirely on their immediate surroundings; even historic celebrity is, in most cases, such a merely national product, that what is great in one land is never correspondingly great in another. From which I venture to conclude that, as we are not in Austria, we are not bound to worship humbly in the Hohenwalden temple."

"Indeed, my dear Miss Brandon," answered the Princess, surprised at this rather hostile language from a woman whose niece was manifestly in love with Conrad Hohenwalden, "I am not suggesting that we should. My sole object is to describe to you a curious example of the folly which may be generated by pride of birth. I should have thought

the case would have some interest for a cosmopolitan observer like yourself."

"No; frankly, I do not care about it. Countess Hohenwalden is agreeable to me as a woman of the world; but she carries me no further. I cannot admit her pretension that she moves about her glories with her gowns, and that the measureless splendour of her name is to evoke instant homage wherever it pleases her to exhibit herself. As I said just now, rank is so local in its nature that nobody is justified in expecting it to produce the same impression abroad as it does at home. A noble in his castle, wherever it may lie, is backed up by the traditions of his family, by the exact knowledge of his history which fills the air around him, by his estate, by his public functions, by his ties with his tenants and his neighbours; his position there is made up of all these elements; it is they, rather than his mere title, which establish it. But when he travels he leaves all this behind him; he takes with him nothing but his title—the least important part of him—and there are so very many titles in circulation about Europe that I think we may be pardoned if we do not

reverence them all. With the exception of a few resounding names that have marked themselves on time, and have become known, consequently, to all mankind, the prestige and the influence of the nobility of each country are limited to that country alone; they have no international application. Most English peers, for instance, may be called important personages in England; but nearly all of them lose three-quarters of their reality directly they cross the Channel. No, my dear Princess, nobility bestows, generally, recognised local superiority, and it often confers material local advantages; but, according to my experience, it has no inherent, abstract, universal, unvarying worth. It is essentially an article for home consumption; it does not bear exportation."

"All that is in part true," replied the Princess; "but I think you go too far. It does not seem to me that rank is as valueless, internationally, as you assert; I should say that it possesses a larger share of transportable utility than you attribute to it. Surely you do not deny that, in the societies of the Continent, foreign titles are looked upon as almost equivalent to home grades?"

“ Ah, Princess, I neither said nor thought that *society* does not care for foreign nobles. I grant that, as you put it, they are received in every country—provided it be possible to verify them—with cordiality and goodwill, though not quite as complete equals, except in special cases. What I meant is that, when they go abroad their general position disappears; the masses take no notice of them; they simply form part of the crowd. At home the crowd regards them, usually, with a certain deference, varying, of course, with their personal merits and with the local state of political feeling. At home the smallest noble is looked upon by the multitude as a far grander personage than any foreign noble whatever. That is why I pretend that rank is largely damaged by expatriation, and that Countess Hohenwalden makes a real mistake if she expects the world at large to bow down before her name.”

“ Within those limits I agree with you. But I cannot prevent myself from being somewhat surprised that you should give expression to such ideas. I fancied you attached a higher price to rank.”

Harriet Brandon laughed, and said no more. Her secret hope was that she had managed to check the suspicions of Princess Mohileff.

In the evening both Claire and Conrad appeared for a while at the concert. But no ingenuity could bring about a talk between them. They were so surrounded and so watched that they had even to keep guard over their eyes in order to prevent them from betraying their thoughts.

Madame de Rochedure made a speech about the real and the unreal in music, branching off to discuss the manufacture of sword-blades and the cultivation of mushrooms, and concluding by a vehement assertion that grace is a far higher property than beauty.

“Grace a higher property than beauty!” exclaimed the Portuguese. “Can any gift stand above beauty?”

“If you will listen without interrupting me, you will see,” replied the Marquise. “It is not because I happen to be French, and because grace is, especially, a French possession, that I affirm this. It is not in France alone that this great principle is applicable; it is universally and eternally true; only there is

about the world so much more of beauty than of grace, that we have few opportunities of testing its value by comparison. It happens, unfortunately, that, while grace is lamentably rare, what the mob calls beauty—raw, vulgar, stupid, uninteresting, unfinished beauty—is almost abundant, in certain countries.”

“You mean beauty of the face, Marquise, I suppose?” inquired the Italian colonel.

“Of course I do. How could I mean anything else? You know, as well as I do, that the word beauty, in its habitual sense, applies to the face alone; and that is precisely one of the reasons why grace is so superior to it, for grace is not limited to a corner, but applies to the entire person. Remember that of the three essential elements of real beauty—form, colour, and expression—the two first only (that is to say, its animal ingredients) are to be found in any quantity; the third (which is the spiritual element) is infinitely less plentiful. So that the deficient mixture which most people are content to call beauty, is not, in most cases, beauty at all, because it is limited to the flesh and proceeds in no way from the soul.”

“Very felicitously argued,” put in the Spanish secretary.

“Grace, however,” went on Madame de Rochedure, with dilating enthusiasm—“grace is, indeed, of a different essence. Grace cannot exist at all unless it is complete; it either is, or it is not; it cannot, like beauty, appear in unfinished or unworthy degrees. That is the first difference between the two. The second difference is, that, as I said just now, grace displays itself, not on the face, but on the whole body, and has therefore our total individuality for its field of action. The third difference, and the greatest, is that, whereas beauty is a mere natural, outside growth, which sprouts on any one, which needs no special soil, which springs up like a thistle amidst weeds, grace, on the contrary, is an outcome of the self, a reflection of the mind, a breathing from within, a language of the personality. Grace is the enchanting offspring of the delicacies, the ripened fruit of all the soft perfections; no common nature can possess it. Grace is the sweet song of movement; it is the immaterial robe of sentiment in action.”

“Charming ! charming !” cried nearly all the men together.

“You really are converting me,” admitted the Portuguese.

“Very pretty, Jeanne,” said Claire ; “and perhaps even approximately true.”

“Grace is the unconscious revelation of interior symmetries,” she continued, more and more excitedly ; “it is the manifestation of the highest and purest femininenesses ; it is the unclouded atmosphere in which the elegancies hover over us ; it is the bright bathing tide in which refinements float around us ; it is the flower-blossom of the fairest womanliness. Who would dare to compare miserable, accidental, brute beauty with such a divine quality as grace ? It is grace alone which lifts us into resemblance with the goddesses.”

“What a pagan you are, Jeanne !” exclaimed Claire, laughing. “All you have said is amusingly fantastic, though I repeat that some of it may be true. But who are ‘the goddesses,’ I should like to know ? I thought there were none left.”

“Ungrateful Claire, unworthy that you are of the grace which you yourself possess, ‘the

goddesses' were ideals of feminine perfectness, invented, according to the then existing lights of men. And one of them, remember, Claire, was called Diana. Has it ever occurred to you to realise what Diana was? Have you ever comprehended that it was she who set before the world the first authoritative conception of grace? Diana, bounding in the chase, was, and has remained, the prototype. She was the original ideal of a lady. The undulating lightness of her step, the ethereal buoyancy of her motion, the supple airy harmony of her movements, revealed to the admiring earth the nature and the laws of elegance. And yet you ask who 'the goddesses' are! Shame, Claire; shame!"

"Forgive me, Jeanne. But let me say, to extenuate my crime, that I did not suppose the present to be so poor in grace that you would be obliged to go back to mythology for an example of it. And after all, Diana represented out-door grace alone; the in-door variety, to which I fancy we attach most value now, was not discovered in her time. Furthermore, do let me remark that amongst the goddesses there really were some very

nasty people, who had no grace at all. If I accept Diana, I can do so only by exception."

"Miss Claire Brandon is right, a hundred times right," put in Princess Mohileff. "The goddesses were most vulgar creatures. I have always felt a particular repulsion for that odious Juno. And as for Venus—no, I will not say in public what I think of Venus. If the whole collection were brought before us now in a beauty show, I am certain we should find them very coarse. I suspect that even Diana herself would not support a critical inspection by modern eyes. Why did you not seek a model in Paris, rather than in Olympus?"

"It was by pure modesty that I did not speak of Paris," replied the Marquise, amidst general laughter.

As they strolled, all together, homewards, Conrad managed to whisper to Claire, "The model was before my eyes. With love I gazed at it while she defined the properties of grace. And, Claire, I recognised that she spoke truth."

Another day passed by in silent meetings, with no opportunity of talk, with no possi-

bility of being alone. They both suffered keenly from the necessity of trying to appear indifferent.

At last, on the third day, the Countess was so much stronger, that it was reasonable to take a half-holiday. Count Hohenwalden told his mother he would profit by her improved condition to visit Nassau; but he did not mention to her the names of his companions.

After lunch they started. The weather was bright. The Russian general was particularly flattered at being selected to accompany the Marquise, and did his best to make her smile. Claire and Count Hohenwalden, opposite each other in the carriage, talked little.

On reaching Nassau they strolled up the wooded slopes towards the Burg Stein ruins, and as they went the Marquise took good care to divide the group. She dragged the General on in front; the others lingered beneath the trees, and soon were out of sight of the whole world.

Then Count Hohenwalden took Claire's hand and said, — "At last, at last, we are

alone. Alone! Oh, how hard it has been to wait! I have passed the dreary hours in dreaming of the life we shall lead, sweet Claire; and just as, after looking at the sun, I can distinguish nothing with my eyes, so, after gazing at you, can I discern nothing with my soul. My dazzled view can descry in the radiance no image but love. It seems to me that in the future there is nothing—nothing—but our two hearts. I have even fancied sometimes that there is no longer any space left in it for other aims. All my visions have faded away before the blinding brightness of to-day. Do you blame me, Claire? Or do you share my dream? And when you look forward to our path together, do you, like me, perceive two loving travellers upon it, and no other sight or sound whatever?"

"Ah yes, indeed, my Conrad! I see as you see—the travellers and naught else. But in my dream, Conrad, one of the two travellers—weak, unknowing, diffident—leans humbly on the other, and seeks for guidance from his strength and knowledge. Look, Conrad, look!—that traveller leans like this."

And, with a blush and with a smile of yearning tenderness and of appealing trust, she placed her two hands upon his arm, and fixing her eyes adoringly on his, hung gently on him, and repeated in a low voice, "Like this, Conrad—like this."

There was a silence. Their eyes spoke for them.

After a time, Claire whispered, "But why should work and love be separate conditions for us? The very greatness of our delight will augment our duty. And remember, Conrad, one special part of your work will lie on our path itself; for there, foremost amongst those who implore your succouring aid, will stand your wife."

"Your love is strangely great, my Claire," said Conrad, looking at her almost with wonder. "Fate is, indeed, generous to me. It is I who am unworthy; and yet you speak to me a language of such glowing tenderness that, if it were not for the vast joy you give me, I should feel ashamed to listen to the words you use."

"Then we are but echoes to each other, Conrad. Then, in each of us, our throbs,

our thoughts, our voices, are but unconscious repetitions of what the other feels and says. A thousand words of love are leaping in our hearts. A thousand yearning fondnesses are calling from each one to the other. A thousand tender eagernesses fill up our souls. We love! Need either of us be ashamed of such a unity as that?"

"Ah, no! That unity is the rarest, highest, divinest form of love. But how can we have reached it with such speed? It was but yesterday that we first met."

"Unknowingly we both were waiting. Unknowingly we both have found. The glory of our gladness is, that we know that we have found. We know it as we know the dawning morning light. It was not — but it is. It needed no beginning!"

Count Hohenwalden held his breath, and closed his hands together, and looked at the sky. He murmured, "Yes, we have found."

"We have found, Conrad," whispered Claire, with a tenderness so ardent, so fervid, so outpouring, that it seemed to him as if the very air around were full of passion and he was breathing it. "We have found . . . and, if

God wills, we will keep. The finding was a gift from heaven ; the keeping will be the sweet office of our own two hearts. Our hearts will be the rejoicing wardens of our love ; in their delighted guard it will affront no perils, will fear no attacks, will know no weariness. Our hearts will be a walled garden in which our love will live—will live alone with bliss, with faith, with truth ; alone in the radiant solitude of self-sufficing completeness.”

“ Yes, yes, my Claire,” echoed the trembling voice of Conrad. “ Yes ; that will be a garden of unending spring ; a garden of ever-budding, unfading flowers ; a garden of intoxicating perfumes and of dazzling colours ; a garden—listen, Claire, and dream—with shaded arbours for soft caresses ; and open lawns for sunny gladnesses ; and tall shrubberies for silent walks, with arms interlaced and thoughts united ; and benches in the corners beneath the spreading trees, for us to rest together from the sweet fatigue of the intensity of happiness.”

They strolled on, slowly ; they held each other’s hands ; and, for a while, neither of them spoke.

Then Claire murmured gently, wonderingly, "And this is love! It is this! This is what men and women are capable of feeling! Our miserable natures, so poor, so insufficient, so unproductive in all the ordinary work of our existence, can rise to this—through love! Conrad, I understand, at last, why it is that love has ruled the world. But do all others feel like this?"

"I cannot tell you, dearest. Like you, I am but an ignorant beginner. Nay, more, I desire to remain at the beginning and to acquire no further knowledge. My present sensations are enough for me. It seems to me, from what I have heard said, that all others do not feel love as we do. But whether, really, we possess a privilege of our own, or whether we simply share a delight that is universal, we, at least, have learnt what love can be."

"But, Conrad, if this is love in time of joy, what are its effects in time of sorrow? Does it ever increase pain? Or, does it always provide a new force to battle with against distress?"

"That, assuredly, must depend on the nature

of the sorrow. It seems to me—so far, that is, as I can divert my thoughts to grief at this moment of supreme delight—that love can scarcely fail to strengthen us against all usual shapes of trial. But there may be moods of it, I fear, which love must, on the contrary, embitter and augment most fearfully. Let us hope that we two will never know those moods, and that our share of suffering will be limited to conditions in which our love will be a solid stay to us.”

And then the talk was over. Madame de Rochedure came down the hill, crying, from afar, “The ruins are not worth seeing. All these German places are deceptions—every one of them. We may as well go back now, and then we shall reach Ems in time for me to drink my water at five. General, and you too, Count, will you go on and get the horses in? We will follow you.”

She took Claire’s arm, and said to her, “I suppose you have perceived that I am your ally?”

“Ally?” asked Claire, with awkwardness and some confusion—“my ally?”

“Please don’t be ungrateful,” replied the

Marquise. "You two want to meet, and to exchange your eloquences, and to be alone in the woods. No—do not contradict me. I will manage it for you—that is to say, until it pleases you to proclaim your bargain to the world ; you will need no more assistance then. I have no reason to feel sympathy for people who desire to marry ; but I am fond of you, Claire, and I intend to play little tricks in your behalf."

Claire was obliged to smile. She even answered, "Thank you, Jeanne."

But, all the same, it seemed to her as if she were consenting to enter into a conspiracy with the Marquise ; and she felt ashamed of it.

On getting home again, Claire saw that her aunt looked at her suspiciously, and she was distressed by her expression. But nothing was said about the excursion.

Count Hohenwalden, on the contrary, found his mother waiting to question him. Her voice was still weak, and she coughed a little as she spoke, but directly he entered the room, she said, resolutely, and even with some appearance of bitterness, "I have learnt from Miss Brandon that her niece was one of this

party to Nassau. Pray, what does that signify?"

"It signifies that Madame de Rochedure asked us, and that, as the day was fine, we went."

"Your foolishness vexes me extremely, Conrad. I am painfully preoccupied about it. After what she has been doing for me, the situation is all the more difficult. She really is an admirable girl; but you cannot marry her. You know that my opinions never change. Therefore it is your duty to keep out of her way."

Count Hohenwalden listened to this declaration with much pain, but with little surprise. Notwithstanding the language his mother had used to him about Claire on the day of his arrival, and notwithstanding the favourable construction which he had done his best to put upon that language, he knew in his heart that it meant nothing. He replied, "I told you, my dear mother, when we talked of this before, that I considered Miss Claire Brandon quite fit to be my wife, and in every respect as good as I am. What she did to you while I was away, and what I have seen of her since my return, has convinced me that

she is very much better than I am. You informed me, on the day of my arrival, that her gentle hand had soothed you in your illness, and that she had behaved like a daughter to you."

"Oh, those were the words I used," interrupted Countess Hohenwalden. "I was conscious that I had said something, but I could not remember what. I had no head then—otherwise I should not have told you that."

"But you did use those very words, and ill though you were, I took them, knowing what had happened during my absence, as an indication of altered feeling in you."

"As an indication of altered feeling, Conrad?" broke in his mother once more; turning in her bed to stare at him with astonishment and almost with anger. "The feelings of my life can never alter. The words referred to what had passed between myself and her. They had not, and never could have, the slightest application to you. You do not mean to say that, after the promise you made me, you are letting yourself be tempted?"

"I made no promise to you, mother. I stated an intention, and I loyally carried out

that intention. I declared to you that I had a deep sympathy for Claire Brandon, and I added that I believed that sympathy to be curable. In order to cure it I left Ems. I was summoned back to your bedside, and there I found her, nursing you. I cannot disguise from you that, under such strange conditions, my sympathy for her has acquired further force."

"Sympathy is one thing—marriage is another. I have deep sympathy for her myself. But her personal merits cannot, whatever be their value, bestow upon her the birth which the wife of a Hohenwalden must possess. I repeat—and I repeat it with all the more certainty because of my own appreciation of her remarkable qualities—that you are unwise to see so much of her. You are only accumulating trouble for yourself—and perhaps for her."

"We will talk about it later on, mother. You are not strong enough yet."

"Do you think it will help me to get well, Conrad, to have the thought of this absurdity added to my weakness? Conrad," she added, with passion, "Conrad, stop this nonsense.

You cannot marry her. I tell you, you *shall not* marry her."

"With the deepest respect, my dear mother, I ask your permission to talk about it later on. Not now."

"Now and hereafter," was the indignant reply, "now and always, I refuse to consider such a question. You cannot, *shall not*, marry her."

Count Hohenwalden rose, kissed his mother's hand, and left the room.

"Not marry her?" he said to himself. "Not marry her? That depends on me, my mother; not on you. I have been a faithful son to you; but I am not your serf. I have given you half my life. I have yielded to almost all your wishes. Hitherto I have resisted you in nothing, excepting in what you describe as Liberalism. Now, however, I may have to go further. I may be obliged to say to you that I choose my wife myself, and for myself. Claire Brandon not a fit wife for me! Ah, my mother, my mother, it is indeed sad that such words should pass your lips!"

And then he told himself, again, that he

had risen above prejudices ; that he had learned to love humanity for its merits and its sufferings—not for its appellations—and to measure men and things by their effective value alone.

What value could be higher than that of Claire ? She was apart from all others. At the worst she was gently born ; at the worst she was of patrician blood ; of that, at all events, he was certain. The accident of title was not worth counting. Such a girl needed no title to make her noble. She was noble in herself.

But then, as he said to himself, with a smile he could not repress, “ I am — a Liberal and in love.”

CHAPTER XVII.

For several days Countess Hohenwalden said nothing more to her son. Their relations with each other continued to be, externally, as affectionate as ever. But each of them was conscious that a cloud had arisen between them.

She reflected unceasingly. Her preoccupation was, not to prevent a marriage—that, of course, was so utterly ridiculous and impossible that it was idle to waste thought upon it—but to shield her son from any unhappiness or regret. She saw that he was strongly tempted, and she mistrusted the Liberalism of his principles as much as she detested it. But he was a Hohenwalden, and in her eyes the loftiness of his race was sufficient, alone, to protect him from all risks. His name was, to her, an unpierceable buckler, which would defend him,

in spite of any weakness of his own, not only from the ignominy of a *mésalliance*, but even from any very serious disappointment, such as less eminently born minds might feel. Still, he was a Liberal; he had lamentable opinions; he had told her that he thought Claire “better than he was”; and there was no denying that, with his peculiar nature, the rupture might cause him some repining. It was most distressing and most preposterous that it should be so; but she could not blind herself to the chance of it. Conrad was so wrong-headed. She loved him tenderly, and it pained her to imagine that he might suffer from such a cause — from such an utterly irrational and inadmissible cause.

Consequently, in order to come to his assistance, it might be just as well to employ mere human means of action. With all her immeasurable pride she was a practical woman, and it occurred to her that it might be useful to find out exactly what the Brandons were, in order to prove to Conrad, by precise evidence, the grotesque absurdity of his allegation that Claire was “as good as himself.”

The result of all this meditation was, that

she decided to write, confidentially, to Madame d'Hérystal for information.

As soon as she was strong enough to use a pen she despatched to her the following letter:—

“I remember with such pleasure the charming intimacy which united us in former days, that I venture to count on an equal fidelity of recollection on your side, and to appeal to your aid in a matter which interests me a good deal.

“We have made acquaintance here with two Miss Brandons, aunt and niece. Madame de Rochedure—who, also, is at Ems—tells me that they are great friends of yours, and that you introduced them into society in Paris.

“For reasons which I need not indicate, I am anxious to learn who they are, and, especially, what is the value of their birth and social position in England.

“The niece is a girl of much merit and much charm. Everybody likes her. She has nursed me through an illness from which I am now recovering; and I have every

reason to speak of her with admiration and gratitude.

“But, who and what are they?”

“I trust you will have no objection to tell me what you know about them.”

When Madame d'Hérystal received this letter, she exclaimed, “Poor Claire! Poor Claire! The explanation is approaching! How will she bear it? This means, of course, that a marriage is in the air; that Countess Hohenwalden has been asked, as she knows me, to find out about the Brandons; and . . . that the story must come out! I wonder why Claire has not written to me herself. Perhaps the matter is not advanced enough. But . . . how am I to answer this? It is very grave. I hate such responsibilities. I must send for Charles at once and see what he says about it. Sometimes it happens that he is wise.”

M. de Morvan came.

His sister gave him the letter in silence.

When he had read it they looked at each other, with feelings approaching to consternation.

After a while M. de Morvan said, “I am

very clear about it, Juliette. You are not bound to state the entire truth. Most certainly it is not your duty to divulge what Harriet Brandon has chosen to conceal. It is for her—for her alone—to choose the moment and the manner of avowal. Besides, it is impossible that *you* can put in circulation a story which may damage Claire.”

“Those are exactly my own views, Charles. Exactly. My impression is, that I am justified, beyond all doubt, in telling Madame de Hohenwalden that the Brandons are an old territorial family of Hampshire—and nothing more.”

“I think so, absolutely,” went on M. de Morvan. “The more I reflect about it, the more convinced do I become. But I think, also, that you should acquaint Harriet Brandon with the fact that you have received this letter. You ought to put her on her guard.”

“It really is delightful, Charles,” replied the Marquise, “to find that we agree so thoroughly. I wonder if it would be pleasant, or only tiresome, if we were always of the same mind, like this?”

“I cannot laugh, Juliette, I am too sad.

Claire is on the edge of a crisis in her life, a crisis of which we cannot even guess the consequences. My affection for her is so deep——”

“So is mine, Charles.”

“My affection for her is so deep that I am frightened. I have a great mind to start at once for Ems.”

“Yes, and frighten Claire as well as yourself. Leave it all to Harriet Brandon for the moment. It is her affair. If anything goes really wrong, if Claire gets into trouble, we will both join her,—though you know I hate to travel. I love her quite enough to break up my habits for her. There is no one else in the world for whom I would do as much—not even for you, Charles.”

“I am fully aware of it, my dear Juliette, and am grateful to you, accordingly.”

Then Madame d'Hérystal observed, “I wonder who the man is. I do not doubt that he is worthy of Claire—so far, that is, as any man can be worthy of her—for she would accept no inferior candidate. She has mentioned no one in her letters to me. She has told me she had met Madame de Hohenwalden; but nothing else. The question is

whether, when her extraordinary position becomes known, she will not encounter amongst certain people prejudices about birth. Madame de Hohenwalden, herself, is unapproachable on it, and therefore I am sorry to see her mixed up in the matter. You see, Charles, there are two points : what will Claire herself feel and say when she learns the story ; and what will others say and do ? ”

“ If the man were French or English it would not matter. But if he is Austrian, or even German, it might be grave, for Austrians and Germans attach so much importance to legitimacy. Like you, I do not like to see Madame de Hohenwalden in it. And yet she says she feels admiration and gratitude for Claire.”

“ Yes ; but she does not know the story yet. When she hears it, both admiration and gratitude may disappear.”

“ The more I look at it,” observed the Marquise, “ the less I like it. Remember what Claire is. If once she falls in love she will do it with outrageous fanaticism. She has not the faintest conception of the utility of healthy selfishness. But, Charles, I must answer the

letter. Be good to me, and make 'a draft' for me; that is what you used to call it when you were in diplomacy, if I recollect aright."

M. de Morvan sat down and wrote—

"I am delighted to have heard from you, my dear friend. You know, from old experience, what true joy it gives me to receive news of you. The years that pass (alas! there have been many since we met) increase my desire to see you again. When will that wish be satisfied?

"I grieve to learn that you have been ill; but, as you tell me you are recovering, I trust I need have no anxiety about you.

"I can answer with tolerable precision the question you put to me. The Brandons have been fixed for several centuries (I do not know how many) on an estate in Hampshire. They have no title, and therefore are not noble in the Continental sense. But I have always understood that English people of that category intermarry, as a matter of course, with the best families in the land. It is true the English have scarcely any prejudices on the subject.

"I allude to marriage, because I take it for

granted that your question has a reference to some matrimonial project.

"I am so glad you appreciate the value of Claire Brandon. She is far away the grandest girl I have known. The man who gets her for a wife will indeed be fortunate.

"I do hope that our renewal of correspondence will not be limited to these two letters, and that you will write to me from time to time. You could not give me a greater pleasure; especially if you tell me you are well."

"Will that do, Juliette?" asked M. de Morvan, as he laid down his pen.

"Perfect, Charles, quite perfect. Just what I should have said myself—if I had known how to say it. I talk better than you; but I admit that you excel me in writing."

"Very good. I conclude by suggesting that you should send Harriet Brandon copies of Madame de Hohenwalden's letter and of your reply."

"I will do so."

.
When Harriet Brandon read Madame d'Hérystal's letter, its first effect upon her

was to make her wish that she were dead. Although her will, her courage, her old love of "straight-going," were still in her at the bottom, the bottom had become so deep and so choked up with other and newer dispositions, that they remained out of sight in it. Habitually, she could scarcely perceive them herself, and no one else had any idea of their existence. The Harriet Brandon of twenty years before had disappeared. The total change of life, of place, of habits, of objects, of surroundings, of society, and, above all, the influence of absorbing love on a heart that had never known affection, had softened her away. She had become somebody else. She had forgotten so completely what she used to be, that it seemed to her natural to shrink, natural to hesitate, natural to fear. Consuming, boundless tenderness had eaten up nearly all vigour in her.

The letter crushed her. It aroused in her unbearable anguish. It seemed to her to place her love in peril, to impose on her an appalling responsibility, and to drive her to a decision of which she felt herself incapable. If she were to die she would avoid all that.

After a while some feeble movements of the old nature rose up within her ; some flickering fancies came to her that she would brave it and have it over ; but they dissolved as soon as they appeared, like the little shreds of transient cloud that form and vanish in mountain air.

She had long known that it was coming. But she was not prepared. She had made up her mind that she never would divulge the secret unless she was forced, irresistibly, to do so. On that point obstinacy had taken in her the place of energy. She had always told herself that she would delay until the last moment. The last moment had not come. It might never come. The letter of Madame d'Hérystal contained a warning ; but, notwithstanding the overwhelming effect it produced upon her, it did not oblige her to adopt any immediate decision. If only she could gain time ! It might be that nothing would come of this love affair with Count Hohenwalden. No proposal had been made—so far as she knew. Their stay at Ems was drawing to its close. She had nearly completed her “cure.” They would go away and the thing would be forgotten.

After all, the situation had not altered.

She had only had a fright the more. Decidedly, she would go on waiting.

And at last she felt almost calm again.

Countess Hohenwalden was discontented with Madame d'Hérystal's reply to her letter. It was far too satisfactory. She had expected evidence of a less flattering nature. She had hoped to be able to prove to her son that the Brandons were very small people indeed, respectable, and even ancient on their estate; but yet, mere farmers. Instead of that, she was informed that they were fit to "intermarry, as a matter of course, with the best families in the land." This was extremely disappointing. In reality, she was perfectly aware already of the position occupied by county families in English society. But it was most annoying, all the same, to receive such news, when she desired to be told exactly the contrary. And anyhow, however good the situation of such people might be in England, it could give them no corresponding place in Austria. Consequently, the information supplied by Madame d'Hérystal changed nothing. The Brandons were not noble. That was enough. Their five

centuries of residence at Hurley gave them, in the eyes of Countess Hohenwalden, the standing of patriarchal yeomen — nothing more. It supplied them, it is true, with an ancestry; but what was that without nobility? Every peasant has ancestors, of some kind. Nobility alone bestows birth.

She was still in bed, but was much better, and was impatient to get done with the affair. Her nature could not support a doubt on such a question. She had waited solely for the answer from Madame d'Héristol, to have a final explanation with her son. Besides, she felt uncomfortable and even somewhat ashamed towards Claire, and was anxious to be able to be grateful to her without hesitation. Her debt to her was large. According to the doctor, she owed her life, in part, to her. She had become fond of her; she admired her; she liked her talk; if only Conrad had not come in the way, she would have desired to make a friend of her, and to see her often in the future. There was a human side to Countess Hohenwalden; indeed, on everything but birth and authority, she was gentle, good, and womanly; her heart was capable

of love and even of gratitude. She was really very, very sorry that this difficulty should have arisen about Claire, of all people in the world; about the very girl towards whom she had the most reason to feel thankful and affectionate. Why had Conrad been so extraordinarily foolish? She would have the matter finished; and then she could treat Claire warmly, as she wished to do.

The afternoon was wet. There was no walking. The Brandons had gone to see some old needlework that was for sale. So Countess Hohenwalden decided to profit by the opportunity.

She sent for her son, and said to him, "Sit down, Conrad. I want to talk to you. I think the time has come to put an end, once for all, to this silly affair; and much as I enjoy your stay here, it seems to me that really you had better go away again. I am recovering fast. Place yourself in safety. Go home."

"I have been waiting," answered Conrad, very calmly, "to speak to you on the subject. If you consider that you are well enough, I will tell you now what I have to say."

“Certainly, I am well enough. But I do not see what you can have to tell me. There is nothing to be told. You have only to run away from the embarrassment into which you have so imprudently thrust yourself.”

“It happens, my dear mother, that I have something to tell you—something important. I have made up my mind to marry Claire Brandon.”

The Countess looked at him pityingly, almost tenderly. The statement he had just made appeared to her so utterly absurd that it scarcely seemed worth while to answer it. But still she did remark, very gently and quietly, “I wish you would not talk nonsense to me, Conrad—it tires me.”

“My dear mother, you have selected this moment for the discussion. I begin by informing you of my decision. I repeat that I have made up my mind to marry Claire Brandon. I am ready to give you my reasons.”

This time she realised that it was true.

She fixed her eyes upon him with extraordinary hardness and intensity. At first she could not speak. She began to lean

forward to him, nearer, nearer, staring at him. The expression of her face frightened him. The mixture of anguish and of anger was terrible to see. She seemed to suffocate.

Suddenly, she cried, "To *me*? You say that to *me*? Retract it, Conrad, . . . instantly."

Her son stood up. Resolutely, but softly, he said again, "I intend to marry Claire Brandon."

She waved her arms wildly. An inarticulate sound came from her lips. Her expression had become despairing. She gasped, "Then . . . then . . . May God . . ."

She fell back on her pillow, in a paroxysm of coughing. Her clenched hands beat the air.

Conrad lifted her up and held her, to assist her breathing.

The cough ceased, for a moment. She thrust him away.

"Go!" she shrieked. "Ask *her*—*her*—to come to me directly she returns. Go!"

"I cannot leave you, mother, in this state."

"Go, I say. I cannot bear your presence. Go—at once. Go!"

“But . . . mother . . .”

“Go, I tell you. I need to be alone. Send *her* to me.”

He went to his room, pressed his hands tightly to his head, and did his utmost to bring order into his troubled thoughts.

Ideas came to him in abundance; each one of them was in itself clear; but they sprang up in detached phrases, and he found it difficult to maintain connexity between them.

“Now I have to do my duty,” was his first exclamation.

“And my duty is obvious.

“It happens that my duty and my desires go together; but that does not blind me.

“My duty—apart from my desires—is unquestionable.

“I owe a duty to my name. I owe a duty to my mother. I owe a duty to myself. I owe a duty to Claire.

“Those duties ought not to conflict with each other. I think they do not.

“I shall cast no dishonour on my name by bestowing it on Claire Brandon.

“I shall not fail in my duty to my mother

because I differ from her as to the nature of my duty to my name.

“I shall do my duty to myself by carrying my convictions to application.

“I shall do my duty to Claire Brandon by making her my wife.

“My mother wishes me to augment the accumulated dignity of the Hohenwalden blood, by adding to our quarterings yet another ‘noble’ coat of arms.

“I wish to be happy according to my own theories and sympathies — provided I can be so worthily and honourably.

“I will marry Claire. It will be worthy and honourable to do so.

“And I will entreat my mother to approve my decision.”

Then he went down to the door of the hotel to warn Claire that his mother desired to see her.

He waited for her almost tranquilly, in the conviction that he was right, in the unhesitating determination to go on steadily to the end.

When Claire came in sight he walked to meet her, and said to her in German, so as

not to be understood by her aunt, "I have told my mother. She wishes to see you at once. You will find difficulties to conquer. Conquer them, as I will conquer them. Go to her."

Claire looked at him rather nervously, for an instant. Then she threw her head back, and answered, firmly, "I go to her, at once."

She went up-stairs without unsteadiness, but still with no precise consciousness of what she was doing. She felt vaguely that a weight was pressing on her.

She entered the room.

Countess Hohenwalden turned her head sharply and cried, with a harsh voice, almost before the door was closed, as if the words had long been waiting to burst from her, "Has Conrad asked you to be his wife?"

Claire stopped short, half-way between the door and the bed, and gazed with fear at the face before her.

Never had she imagined—the less had she seen—such a concentrated expression of pain, of rage, of unappeasable determination, of furious will struggling against physical exhaustion.

She was so affected that she could not speak. Terror, pity, sympathy, astonishment, were mixed up in her heart.

The Countess stared at her, and waited for her reply.

At last it came.

"Yes. Count Hohenwalden has asked me to be his wife."

"And you . . . what answer have you made to him?"

"I have accepted him for my husband."

"Ah! . . ." gasped the Countess, in a long low breath. "Ah! . . ."

She fell back, in weakness, and the cough seized her.

Claire approached the bed, but did not venture to lay her hand upon it. She was no longer there as nurse.

The cough stopped. The Countess turned once more to Claire. She made an immense effort to be calm, and, partially, she succeeded. Her face became almost gentle. Something of her ordinary self returned to her. She murmured, slowly and with difficulty, "If it had been otherwise I could have felt much affection for you. I owe you a heavy debt. You

have been strangely good to me. You have rare qualities. Alas! why has this cruel obstacle sprung up between us?" And then she stopped again, to breathe. "Now, sit down. What I have to say to you must be put into few words. My strength is insufficient. My son cannot marry you."

Claire sat resolutely still. Her hands were clenched. But no other outward sign revealed the cruel emotion which agitated her.

The Countess went on again—speaking with increasing difficulty: "He cannot marry you, because the tradition of his race and his duty to his name oblige him to choose a wife whose birth, measured by the ideas of his own country, is equal to his own."

The cough came on again; the breathing grew heavier. Still she persisted: "In everything but birth you are the wife I should have desired for him. I mourn that he should lose you. But he cannot marry you. . . . I forbid it."

Claire rose.

She fixed her eyes intently on Countess Hohenwalden; but there was no meaning in them; they had lost all sense.

She spoke—but the voice did not sound like her own.

“Madame, I have received from your son the promise of his love. I have given to your son the promise of my own. I do not release him from his promise. It is my purpose to carry out my own. The motives you invoke are insufficient to alter my resolve. My birth is honourable. If it had not been honourable I should have refused to become your son’s wife. It would not be questioned in my own land. I claim the same right here. I ask your permission to withdraw.”

The Countess trembled slightly. She became even paler than before. Her fingers played mechanically with her handkerchief. At last she answered, “Then . . . you defy me? . . . Both of you. We will see.”

Claire bowed and left the room.

In the passage, waiting for her, in deep anxiety, she found Count Conrad. They walked together, silently, to the sitting-room to which the Brandons had removed since Countess Hohenwalden’s illness. Harriet Brandon had gone to see her doctor. They were therefore sure to be alone for a while.

They took each other's hands ; they looked in each other's eyes, sadly, apprehensively. "Conrad," said Claire, "it is indeed a heavy trial to commence our love by a conflict with your mother. I longed to be to her a dutiful and devoted daughter. She rejects me."

"What did she say ? Tell me. Quickly," asked Conrad, with eager emotion.

"I scarcely know. . . . I cannot remember . . . exactly, how it passed. It was very frightful. She insisted that you cannot marry me because I am not noble. She forbade our marriage."

"Well ? Well ? . . . Then ? . . . What next ?"

"I replied that I count on your faithful love, as you can count on mine. I declared that my birth is honourable, and would be so accepted in my own land. She told me we defied her. And then I came away. That is the substance of what passed ; but my head is not clear, and I cannot tell it precisely as it happened." Gloomily, Claire sat down. She drew him to her. "Conrad," she went on, "I should have brought to your mother a very tender heart. Yet . . . she will not

have me. Must I tell myself I shall not find a mother in her? Such love as ours merits, surely, her approbation."

"She will yield—she will yield!" exclaimed Conrad.

"Will she? I doubt that she will ever permit me to be her daughter. I felt myself unworthy of your love; I told you so in simple truth and in entire humility; but not unworthy in this way—not in this way, Conrad."

"Now, listen to me, Claire!" cried Conrad, springing to his feet before her, still holding both her hands, and gazing at her with passionate resolution. "Now, listen to me. While you have been telling me this, I have kept back the words that were boiling up in me—that were choking me. I have waited till you had finished. Now let me speak. My life, my hope, my whole force, power, and will are yours. I have found in you strength, faith, and joy. We are one, now and until the end. With the profoundest gratitude I accept your love. With the humblest homage I entreat you to do my name the honour of bearing it. I am not a helpless child, unable

to fashion my own thoughts, and needing to be managed by my mother. I am a man, who has searched, and felt, and grieved. I have struggled to free myself from the domination of the past—to cease to see in it an idol or a fetish—but yet to preserve of it, in all their value, the noble teachings, the admirable models, the lofty duties it has bequeathed to me. I have sought, with the aid of what I have retained of the past, to live for the present and the future. To my mother the past is a pitiless tyrant, disposing at its will of the present and the future; to me it is a friendly guide and counsellor. To my mother the present is full of error, because, instead of humbling itself before the past, it claims an essence of its own; to me the present is all buoyant hope, because it is the season of absorbing work—because it has taught me to look forward to what is coming, not backward to what is gone. To my mother the past lives; to me it is dead. To my mother the present is but a link in the transmission of history; to me it is my own history, my life, my object, my being. To my mother the future is but a continuation of the past; to

me it contains the promise, the outcome, the destiny of all that is done to-day. In asking you, Claire, to be my wife, I ask you to join with me in respecting, in admiring, in cherishing the past, when, according to our judgment, it deserves to be respected, admired, cherished; to join with me in using and applying the present for our own duty, for our own progress, and for the good of those amongst whom our road may lie; to join with me in preparing the future for those who may come after us. That, Claire, is my conception of my duty to my name, to myself, to you; that is my interpretation of the responsibilities and of the functions of birth. My mother has never consented to assist me in bearing those responsibilities, — in discharging those functions. I call you, Claire, to stand at my side and to be my fellow-labourer. The other day, on the hillside at Nassau, I said to you, in the blind effulgence of my love, that, before us, I could perceive no work, that I could discern no other mission than love. Wisely, truthfully, you answered me that work and love cannot be separate conditions for us two. In work, fortified by love, we shall find our peace.

In labouring to diminish the sufferings of others, we may perhaps merit that our own trials shall be lessened, and that my mother shall be led to be a real mother to us. I ask you, Claire, to consent to our immediate marriage."

She smiled—but there was a sadness in her smile.

"I consent," she said, "with my whole self, and soul, and purpose. And yet I know that it will pain me to kneel with you at the altar without receiving your mother's blessing. But, Conrad, my Conrad, my heart is filled so measurelessly with love for you, that, in the greatness of my yearning, I may, perhaps, find forgetfulness of her disapproval. Now I must speak to my aunt. I will tell her all when she returns."

"And I, dear Claire, will come to her this evening to go through the formal ceremony of asking her to give you to me."

"I give myself, Conrad. She will joyously confirm the gift. And when we have become one, we shall part no more!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

COUNT HOHENWALDEN went to his mother's room.

He found her gazing before her. She did not look at him. She was so still that her breathing alone showed she was alive; it was harsh and convulsive.

She was on her back; her thin, white hands lay inertly on the coverlet; her sunken cheeks were pallid — faintly grey and yellow; her white hair was pulled back beneath her cap, and made no struggle to escape; her hooked nose and pointed chin were pinched and shrunk, her lips compressed. She had the dull rest of death, without its silence. She had the aspect of an ancient Sibyl, but strengthless, prostrated. All her usual gentleness and graciousness were gone.

Conrad stood at her bedside and waited.

She took no notice of him.

After a while he said, "Mother, for years you have been acquainted with my opinions. I cannot change them. I ask you to permit me to act upon them without losing your affection because I do so." She made no reply. Her eyes did not move. "Mother, I entreat you to have pity on me. I supplicate you to recognise the noble qualities of Claire, and to accept her as a fit wife for me."

Slowly she turned towards him. There was no expression in her face. It was numbed, impassive.

Slowly, with an effort, and with a husky, stifled voice, she whispered, between two spasmodic respirations, "If you marry her, I will never see you again."

She turned her head straight, and her eyes resumed their objectless stare.

Conrad leant over her imploringly. "Mother, listen to me. Mother, do not cast me from you. Do not, for a dogma, tear out your own heart. Do not, for an idea, drive from you your own son. In the name of all the duty I have shown to you; in the name of all the love that I have borne to you; in the name of

my dead father ; for the honour of your own pride and of our name, I beseech you to yield."

Slowly she turned once more.

With even more material difficulty, but with even more indifference of manner than before, as if, indeed, she were not interested at all, she murmured, almost softly, "If you marry her, I shall cease to have a son."

She moved herself back into her place, quite quietly, as if she had made an observation of no importance ; and her hard breathing was the only sound.

Conrad staggered—as if he had been struck. His mother's words, so pitiless, so remorseless, tore through his heart. They sounded to him as if they broke the bond between them.

His head and arms hung down, as if he could not carry them.

An unbearable weight pressed on him. The air around him seemed solid with it. He had the sensation of sinking away under it, as if he were no more.

Yet he knew that he was still there—still standing, still upright. His body was untouched. It was his spirit that was trampled in by the words his mother had spoken.

Suddenly, in the same air, amidst the crushing, he heard what seemed to him a music; it sang to him, "Go to Claire. She will support you. Lean on her."

And afterwards he found that, unknowingly, unawares, he had left his mother and had reached his own room.

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Claire waited anxiously, apprehensively, for Harriet Brandon. It was not in that way that she had expected to tell her all, at last. She had dreamed of a wild spring to her aunt's neck; of arms thrown round each other in uncontrolled delight; of passionate outpouring of ardent words; of profound rejoicings; of blushing confidences, and timid, half-told secrets; of caresses, kisses, and endearments; of all that passes between a mother and her child when the child rushes to her mother's breast, hides her face upon it, and whispers, "I love."

Nothing of all this was now in store for Claire. Countess Hohenwalden had rendered it impossible. Claire felt that she had been robbed of the right to a great joy.

The tale she had to tell was of trouble, as

well as of gladness. How could her aunt exult with her under such conditions?

She awoke, too, suddenly, to the memory of the hesitation which her aunt had already manifested when the idea of marriage with Count Hohenwalden was mentioned between them, and of the allusion she had made to his mother's theories of birth. Her aunt had foreseen the difficulty! How wise she was! How full of knowledge of character!

She sat and waited on, and, as the minutes passed, she grew more and more dispirited.

Sometimes, for an instant, a warm wave ran through her and swept away all doubts, all fears. While it bathed her heart she became blind to cares and difficulties, she saw only the brightness of her love. And when the wave was gone, doubts and fears seemed even gloomier than before it passed.

Then came revolt. Her will arose.

"No; I will not give way like this," she cried. "I am innocent of all fault. I have to suffer; but that is the lot of life. I love and am loved, intensely. If his mother will not have me, I shall none the less be his. For

each other we shall be sufficient. I fear no longer. I will not consent to fear."

She threw her head back. Her mouth grew resolute. Her eyes were brave.

The door opened. Harriet Brandon entered.

Claire advanced to meet her — without a smile. At the sight of her aunt she became suddenly quite calm; excitement left her; but she remained deeply anxious. Her heart did not beat rapidly; the blood did not flush into her cheek; she felt no ardour. Instinctively, she murmured, "Oh, it should not have been like this!"

She fixed her eyes upon her aunt and held out her hands.

Her aunt looked at her, at first, with surprise; then, suddenly, with fear. She understood.

"Aunt," said Claire, gravely, almost solemnly, "I ask you to approve my marriage with Conrad Hohenwalden. I love him. He loves me. He will come to you this evening to tell you all."

Harriet Brandon stood still and stared. She showed neither gladness nor assent. She remained motionless in the middle of the room, gazing, as if in stupor, at Claire. She seemed

to feel no sensation. Yet her face was weary and gloomy. She said nothing.

Claire was chilled ; fear almost came back to her ; but she continued, " Unhappily, dear aunt, Countess Hohenwalden refuses to accept me as her daughter, and . . . "

Claire stopped. She saw, with abrupt bewilderment, that an expression of glad relief—of unmistakable delight indeed—had sprung instantly, as she pronounced those words, into her aunt's countenance. Sadness vanished from it. It became almost contented.

The explanation was that Harriet Brandon had seen, in the conduct of Countess Hohenwalden, a motive of delay. More time was gained. The revelation could be postponed. Her face betrayed the soothing confidence that had arisen in her.

Astounded by this extraordinary change, startled and distressed by her aunt's incomprehensible joy, Claire's head began to turn. She became faint, and tottered to a chair.

Then, at last, her aunt seized her in her arms, exclaiming, " Darling, my poor darling, I expected it ! I knew that such a marriage was impossible."

“But . . . but . . .” murmured Claire, struggling against her weakness, “. . . but if you anticipated this difficulty, what is it that makes you so glad to learn that it has really arisen? Evidently, you are pleased at it. Why? And I am sad, Tatte. I am very sad. Why are you so glad?”

“Oh, I am not glad, Claire. Pray, do not imagine that. Only it is better that it should be finished.”

“Finished!” exclaimed Claire, looking feebly, but with amazement, at her aunt. “What is finished? Do you suppose we are not going to be married because his mother does not think me noble? Why, Tatte, I have just asked your consent to our marriage, and he is coming to you for the same purpose. We mean to be married immediately.”

Harriet Brandon turned very grave again.

“Do you mean to say,” she asked, “that you propose to marry, notwithstanding the opposition of his mother? That would be very wrong, Claire. Such a marriage could not bring happiness.”

At this extraordinary remark Claire started in her chair and looked, in breathless astonish-

ment, at her aunt. She was behaving in a manner which seemed, to Claire, not only inexplicable, but unnatural—cruel, even. She, positively, was not delighted at the marriage! Still more, she was evidently gratified that there was an obstacle to it! She ought to have been full of tender joy—but she showed none at all! What could be at the bottom of this strangeness?

Claire was stupefied.

Suddenly, recollections of previous doubts, of previous attempts at explanation, came echoing back to her, and shook her violently.

It was her aunt—her Tattle—her friend—her mother—who was doing this. Why did she behave to her in this way?

And this, this, was the manner of the announcement of her love for Conrad! This was the joyous scene to which she had looked forward with such delighted expectation?

She felt feeble, purposeless. Yet, vaguely, she longed to stand up and combat.

But — against whom was she to fight? Against her aunt? That was too odious even for a passing thought. Her aunt could not be wrong.

And yet her aunt—her aunt!—was hostile to the marriage, and was pleased to learn there was a hindrance to it!

It was inconceivable—horrible.

At last Claire said, in broken, disconnected sentences, “I am not well . . . My head turns round . . . I must talk to you—yes, I must talk to you—but not now . . . There are things I do not understand . . . which . . . which . . . I shall have to ask you to explain to me . . . Some of them have been going on for years . . . I am very unhappy . . . I should like to know—at once . . . But . . . for the moment . . . I cannot . . . My brain is empty . . . Only, now—directly—you must say that you approve my marriage, and that you rejoice with me for the great love I feel . . . It is so great—so great . . . Do say so . . . now . . . at once.”

“Of course, darling, of course,” replied Harriet Brandon, uncomfortably, hesitatingly, equivocally. “Of course I quite approve the idea of your marrying Count Hohenwalden, so far as he is personally concerned. I think he would make you a good husband. But, as I observed just now, it is evident that, if his mother objects, it will be difficult to go on.”

“Difficult to go on? Oh, aunt, how can you use such words? Conrad will do everything that becomes a son to induce his mother to consent. But be convinced that he will act as becomes a man if his mother continues to refuse. Such love as ours does not accept defeat.”

“Well, dearest, I will talk to him this evening. Under the circumstances it is impossible to be precipitate.”

“Really, I understand less and less, aunt. Perhaps it is my head. You seem to wish to make delay. What for? I could not doubt that the mere fact that Countess Hohenwalden shows opposition would have made *you* even more desirous to help us than you would be naturally. Instead of that, you talk of difficulties and delays, and tell me it is impossible to be precipitate. What can be in your thoughts? You are not yourself. You are not behaving like my dear aunt. You do not seem to realise that it is Claire who is telling you of her love—your Claire. You answer me as if I were a stranger.”

“Darling, darling, how can you think such things?” expostulated Harriet Brandon. “Your

happiness is the sole object of my life. Your permanent happiness, I mean. This may be only a fancy, and . . .”

“Let us cease talking, for the moment, aunt. You bewilder me. You distress me. What can it all mean? Oh, if only I were well! But . . . I am ill. To-morrow . . . to-morrow . . . I trust this will be explained. Meanwhile . . . I will try not to think.”

Then Claire went away to her room, lay down upon her bed, and, in her exhaustion, slept.

Harriet Brandon remained alone.

She was not particularly alarmed. The habit of living with a dread had blunted her susceptibility. Provided the explosion could be deferred, provided Claire's ignorance, and consequently Claire's peace, could be prolonged, she was relatively content. She was profoundly grieved that Claire should have a sorrow of any kind; but her distress about this love affair with Count Hohenwalden was, in Harriet Brandon's eyes, of no account compared to what she would feel if the truth were known to her.

She persisted in the conviction that she was

right to have kept the secret, and right to go on keeping it. The obstinacy with which she clung to it was almost all that remained to her of her old tenacity. It seemed to her quite natural to protect Claire from pain to-day, even at the risk of a greater pain to-morrow. But then, it had never been her nature to give thought to to-morrow.

Of the four persons interested in the marriage, it was she who, for the moment, felt the least emotion. Even the declaration made to her by Claire that they must have an explanation together next day, failed to make her really anxious. That was to-morrow.

When Conrad Hohenwalden came to her in the evening, she received him with a curious calm. Her conviction was that no danger was to be apprehended. At other moments she had thought just the contrary, and had suffered cruelly from her terror. But she was in a fit of reaction ; as things then stood, it seemed to her, for the instant, that the danger was not immediate, and that as it was not immediate it did not exist. She had constantly in her ears a phrase which one of Claire's many masters had employed during her studies in

Paris. In explaining to her the principles of the Code Napoléon he had one day alluded to the doctrine that "a debtor who has to pay at a future time owes nothing." In some strange way these words had struck Harriet Brandon and had remained fixed in her memory. She applied them to her own position, repeated to herself, comfortingly, "*qui a temps ne doit rien*," and persuaded herself, according to this tenet of French law, that, until the danger burst upon her, it had no real being.

So, when Conrad Hohenwalden, looking very grave and sad, sat down opposite her and began his statement, she smiled upon him gently and felt no remarkable emotion.

"I have come to you," he said, "to ask you to give me your niece for my wife. I will not talk to you of the love I bear to her. It is very, very great. I ask you, simply, as regards that part of the subject, to believe that I feel towards her as the future husband of such a girl ought to feel. Under other conditions than those in which, most unhappily, I find myself, I should have yielded with delight to the temptation to try to describe to you the intensity of the emotions she has aroused in

me ; but, as things are, I will pass on at once to another aspect of our position.

“ My mother has ideas of birth—I believe you are acquainted with them—which dominate her entire character. The goodness, the kindness, the feminine gentleness, the affectionateness, which are so abundant in her, are all subservient to the overruling thought of blood. She knows what Claire is ; she has seen what Claire can be and do ; she knows that Claire would be to me a perfect wife ; but she has informed me that as Claire is not what she calls ‘ noble,’ she will not give her approbation to our marriage. Thus far I have failed to shake the resolution she has expressed.

“ Under these most painful circumstances, I have decided to marry without the consent of my mother. I am free. I have thought, at great length, over all the conditions of my position, and it is after meditating deeply that I make this announcement to you, and that I ask you to assent to our immediate marriage.”

Harriet Brandon had been watching Conrad while he spoke ; but she had not listened with very keen attention to his words. Of course she heard them all, but they produced no

particular impression on her. She had guessed beforehand the substance of what he was going to say, and her mind was so entirely filled up with her own determination to gain time, that there was no room in it for any other feeling. Her one thought was to shield Claire from knowledge.

“In principle,” she answered, “I should be delighted, my dear Count Hohenwalden, to see Claire become your wife. I have already told her so. But the opposition of your mother creates a situation which seems to me to render immediate marriage quite impossible. How can you make Claire a member of your family so long as your mother refuses to admit her into it? I trust she will give way. But I think you ought to wait until she does.”

“Then am I to understand,” asked Conrad, “that, while you consent to our marriage in itself, you object to its taking place at once?”

“Oh, I do not like you to say that I object. The word is too harsh. I point out to you a difficulty which appears to me insurmountable, and that, in one sense, does certainly constitute an objection. But, remember that the

objection does not come from me. It arises with your own mother."

"Yes, that is true," went on Conrad. "But I have just declared to you that I have decided to marry without the consent of my mother, and that, consequently, her objection produces no effect, so far as I am concerned."

"Ah! that is where we disagree. In my view, your mother's opposition cannot be removed by your own declaration that you intend to take no notice of it. That act is between your mother and yourself; it has no influence on your mother's attitude towards Claire. That attitude is wounding for Claire: but even on that I do not insist now. The gravity of the position results, in my eyes, from the fact that I do not see how a girl can become a member of a family under such circumstances."

"She will become a member of my family by becoming my wife," replied Conrad, very earnestly.

"That argument has an appearance of truth; but it is a deceptive appearance. Your wife will not be, cannot be, a member of your family, until your mother accepts her as such."

“ You cause me much pain, Miss Brandon,” said Conrad, gloomily. “ Knowing your extreme tenderness for Claire, I had ventured to count on your cordial support and approval, and I learn, with surprise and very keen disappointment, that I have made a mistake. Before carrying the conversation further, I ask your permission to consider, with Claire, what reply I ought to make to you.”

Harriet Brandon was alone once more.

At first her thoughts remained unchanged. Claire’s ignorance must be maintained, at any cost. That was her guiding principle. The marriage must even be broken off, if possible, rather than that she should learn the truth.

But—she did not know how—another view began to glimmer up ; another aspect of the situation arose before her—faintly, at first ; then, somewhat clearly ; at last, distinctly, vividly.

What would happen if, finally, the truth had to come out ?

What would Claire say ?

What would be her feeling and her attitude towards her aunt, for concealing from her a secret of such infinite gravity, until it was wrung out by causes which could no longer be resisted ?

She, Harriet Brandon, judged—had judged for many years—that it was in the supreme interest of Claire that the truth should be concealed until the last moment of possibility. She had still no doubt on that point. She was so accustomed to see the situation in that light, that she had grown incapable of perceiving it in any other. But now a new problem sprang up before her; the question was no longer what she thought herself, but what Claire would think. Sometimes, previously, the same doubt had passed through her head. But on other occasions there had been no urgency. Now, on the contrary, it seemed to her, all in an instant, that this matter of Claire's opinion of her conduct was immediate, altogether pressing. She could not trace the procession of thought by which it thrust itself before her. But there it was, imperiously claiming her attention, insisting on a reply.

What would Claire say when she knew it?

Claire would sit in judgment on her.

With the abrupt revulsiveness which had grown to be an essential characteristic of her condition of mind, she found herself suddenly in great terror. A quarter of an hour before,

she had been quite convinced and almost quiet. Now, she overflowed with doubt and fright. The conviction that she had done right served for nothing in her alarm. She recognised, startlingly, that she might have been quite right herself, and yet, perhaps, quite wrong towards Claire. But she had been actuated by pure love of Claire! Yes; but Claire might think that love should have guided her altogether otherwise. The horrible idea started up before her that Claire might accuse her of having destroyed her life. To say that she had acted for the best, according to her appreciation, was evidently an empty answer. How could she ever have thought it would suffice?

Would Claire even admit that she had acted for the best?

Claire would judge by results alone. She, Harriet Brandon, had naturally been influenced by causes, and had only given to results a secondary place in her consideration. Yet now they had reached results. If Claire had gone into this affair with Count Hohenwalden in full knowledge of the nature of her situation; if everything had been explained; if

there had been nothing to conceal, nothing to avow; if Claire had been acquainted with the truth from the beginning, she would then have been mistress of her acts and of their consequences. But she had proceeded in the dark, in utter unconsciouness, in all the confidence of ignorance. She had drifted into this difficulty without suspecting its existence. She had trusted to her aunt—and her aunt had deceived her!

Again—again—what would she say?

Harriet Brandon became aware that, possibly, she was guilty of a great wrong.

If only this marriage could be prevented she would get out of this frightful difficulty. In that case she promised herself no other should occur. She would tell Claire everything—as soon as she was free.

But they said they had decided to marry at once! How horrible! Of course she could not refuse. And even if she did refuse, they would get married all the same.

It seemed as if the fatal moment were almost reached; as if a position were arising in which the avowal might be extorted from her, at any instant, by events.

Claire could not become a wife until she was told.

What would she say? Oh, what would she say?

Harriet Brandon walked up and down the room, and wrung her hands.

Could she go on postponing?

Again—again—what would Claire say?

Would Harriet Brandon lose her love?

Then she began to talk aloud.

“Oh, why did I not see it in this light before? How could I have been so blind? Why did I not understand when Madame d’Hérystal spoke to me about it? Why did I not comprehend that, as it had to come, it had better have been dealt with while no special difficulties and no special dangers were attached to it? By keeping it back I have allowed Claire to put herself into a position which is not only totally false, but out of which she cannot escape without infinite humiliation and infinite trial. And it is I—I, her aunt, her mother, who have done her this wrong; I, who have lived for her alone; I, who have no other thought but her; I, who love her with all my soul and all my

tenderness ! And I never saw it until now !”

Harriet Brandon’s anguish had become unbearable.

It seemed to her that she was breathing fear.

She sat down ; got up again ; walked feverishly about ; covered her face with her hands ; threw herself on to the sofa, and asked herself, passionately, what she ought to do ?

But she could see no solution.

Suddenly, she started off to Claire, who had not dined, and was in bed.

She found her sleeping quietly, and did not dare to wake her. If it had been possible to speak to her, she would probably, in her excitement, have poured out the whole tale to her without any warning.

Wearily, sadly, she returned to her own room. Nothing could be done. She must wait till the next morning.

But how was she to get through the night ?

She had recognised with such violence that she had made an immense mistake, she felt herself so responsible for that mistake, and it

seemed to her so irreparable, that she stamped with rage against herself, and repeated unceasingly, "Why did I not see it long ago as I see it now?"

The slow hours dragged along, but they brought no relief to Harriet Brandon. The dismay which had come into her seemed rather to augment. She kept on saying to herself, "Why did I not see it before? It seems so clear now."

Between the fragments of broken sleep into which she fell exhaustedly, the blackness of the situation appeared to her to grow more and more intense. The morning would place her face to face with Claire. Must she tell her all? At once? Or could she still gain time? And if she were forced to tell, how should she approach the subject? Above all, worse than all, more frightful than all—what would Claire say?

When dawn appeared she woke up in terror.

Then there came to her the feeling that it was better to have done with it, and for a while she was carried tumultuously away by the decision that she would wait no longer.

She would go to Claire's room at once, and speak. But this did not last. Her courage failed again. Perhaps Claire was still unwell. Oh, if she were, there must be delay. And she perceived that she almost hoped once more.

At half-past six she got up. She sent her maid to inquire how Claire was, and learnt that she was better, and was dressing to accompany her aunt, as usual, to the water-drinking.

Of course, the avowal could not be made till after their return.

When Claire came in to kiss her aunt, they looked nervously at each other. Little was said. They walked in silence to the Kurhaus.

In silence they wandered up and down, while Harriet Brandon drank her water.

In silence they came home again.

CHAPTER XIX.

ON returning to the hotel Harriet Brandon found a letter upon her table. The address on the envelope was in Mr Cumber's writing. Inside it was another letter. She started violently. It was from her brother George.

She tore it open, and read with trembling haste—

“MY DEAR HARRIET,—A year has passed since I met you at Ryde.

“Is it of any use to appeal to you once more, and to entreat you to permit me to undo, so far as I can, the wrong I have committed?

“I remember too well what happened between us twelve months ago to permit myself to allude to my own motives for desiring to

restore my brother's child to the position of which I have deprived her.

"I speak solely in *her* interest.

"Surely, for *her* sake, you will not persist in refusing to allow me to do whatever may be possible.

"I have spoken to Cumber (who forwards this letter to your address). He will say nothing to you, unless you write to ask his opinion. But, if you consult him, he will tell you what he thinks can be effected.

"I implore your forgiveness—and *hers*.—
Your affectionate brother,

"GEORGE BRANDON."

Harriet Brandon dropped into an arm-chair, closed her eyes, and thought excitedly.

Was this a mockery of fate?

By what strange accident did this letter come at such a moment?

Could there be anything in it?

Could it lead to anything?

A year before, when George had proposed to her to recognise Claire as his brother's child, she had refused to take any heed of so unrelaisable a dream.

But here was the same offer made again. And made, too, at an instant when Claire's future might be at stake. What did such a hazard mean?

Was it worth while to write to Mr Cumber?

If so, should she delay the avowal until she received his reply?

No—nothing was possible. It was idle to reflect. It was useless to consult Cumber. Nothing could efface the verdict of the jury, except the discovery of the marriage. George could give Claire Hurley, if he liked. But what was the use of that? That would not make her legitimate. It would only make her rich. And that was a small result indeed, in comparison with the other.

Besides, he had not said what it was he wished to do. His offers were quite vague. She only half believed them. They were dictated solely by his own selfish desire to calm his conscience.

He had seen Claire. He had been impressed by her. But so was everybody. She knew that no one could behold Claire without being deeply struck by her. George was like all the world in that respect.

At all events, there was a sort of satisfaction in possessing his written declaration that he wished to make reparation for his conduct. It was not in his power to efface the consequences of his work ; but it might assist her in the terrible explanation that was approaching, to be able to prove that, so far as he was personally concerned, he withdrew his imputations against Claire. It seemed to diminish, some little, the horror of the story. For that motive it was as well that the letter should have come, so strangely.

After breakfast she would decide.

If the moment had really arrived, she would face the duty and would speak. She could not go on in that way.

Half an hour later she was again in her chair, still reflecting, still hesitating.

Another hour passed ; an hour of such agitation that, at moments, it seemed to her that her brain was breaking.

Then, suddenly, came impulse—one of the old instincts. It could not be controlled. For an instant she was her former self once more, full of action and resolution.

She rose—determined.

She rang the bell.

She told her maid to ask Claire to come to her.

She stood in the middle of the room, and listened with clenched hands and set teeth, for footsteps.

She heard them approach.

Claire entered, pale, grave, but unfaltering ; her head thrown back.

Face to face, they stopped, for a long instant, gazing at each other.

Harriet Brandon crossed over to the door and locked it. Then Claire spoke—solemnly.

“I trust, my dear aunt, that you have sent for me now, in order to explain to me what I do not understand. I implore you to delay no longer. I am suffering too much. Last night you employed strange language about my marriage. And let me remind you that, since that day at Venice, I have waited, out of deep respect for your silence, without addressing one single question to you. Will you—can you—tell me now? That is, if there is anything to tell.”

Harriet Brandon seized Claire in her arms and cried, “Darling, come to me. Sit down

next to me. Yes, the time has come. Yes, there is something to tell. Hold my hands—tight. Kiss me—kiss me. And, I entreat you, judge nothing until I have finished. May God give strength to both of us to go on to the end!”

Claire’s eyes became more fixed; but she remained motionless.

“I have to tell you, Claire, the story of yourself. Alas! alas! You have a story. It has been the object of my life to hide it from you, encouraging myself, madly, to believe that it could be hidden, that you need never know it. But now, to-day, after what has happened, I am forced to speak.”

Claire shivered slightly. Her hands were ice. Her eyes grew more distended. Her lips were pressed so tightly that they turned white.

“My brother Charles—your father—married a French lady. Your mother died when you were born. You know that. But, what you do not know is, that after your father’s death, at Lisbon, you were brought to me, at Hurley, by Berthe, with a letter from your father, confiding you to my care.

"Neither do you know . . . be brave, Claire . . . Oh, how shall I tell it?"

Stiff and still, Claire stared.

"You do not know . . . oh, kiss me, darling . . . kiss me, dearest . . . come into my arms while I tell you. There . . . there . . . closer still . . . into my heart. . . . You do not know that we never were able to . . . to obtain proofs that . . . that your father . . . was . . . was . . . closer to me, Claire . . . closer . . . lean on me . . . was . . . married."

Convulsively, she flung her arms round Claire, and, almost with a shriek, she cried, "Darling! . . . darling! . . . my poor darling!"

And, in terror, she glanced at Claire to assure herself that she was still alive.

Slowly, gently, very gently, Claire released herself from her aunt's arms. Slowly she raised her head. Blanched, rigid, breathless, dazed, held up by will alone, her deep wide-opened eyes turned into glass, her body into stone, her spirit into deadness, she murmured, in a far-off voice, "Proof that . . . my father was married? I . . . I do not . . . not understand."

“Dearest, darling, my Claire,” gasped Harriet Brandon, in broken sobs, passionately pressing Claire’s hands and covering her with frantic kisses, “we never could discover where . . . or when . . . the marriage took place . . . and . . . and . . . that is not all. . . . Oh, Claire, my own child . . . it is awful . . . I do not know how to say it . . . my brother George . . . said there had been no marriage, and that he was the heir, and . . .”

Claire broke suddenly away from her aunt’s hold, sprang wildly to her feet, and screamed, “There was no marriage! Then . . . then . . .”

A great groan broke from her.

She seized her head with her two hands, and shook it in her anguish. She writhed in panting agony. Hysterically, she shrieked, “No marriage! . . . no marriage! Great God! . . . Then . . . what am I?” And then, with a plaintive wail, she moaned, “Oh, Conrad . . . Conrad . . . Conrad!”

“Come back, come back!” cried Harriet Brandon, following Claire entreatingly. “Come back to my arms and tell me that you love me still. Oh, Claire, my Claire! There is more

yet. Then, George began an action, saying he was the heir . . . and that you were not . . . and, oh my darling, my child . . . the jury gave a verdict for him . . . and declared the marriage . . . was not proved."

Claire raised her arms; but they dropped again. She opened her lips; they closed again. Faintly, with a resignation so appallingly gentle, in such inconceivable contrast with the convulsive outburst of a moment before, that Harriet Brandon asked herself, in dread, whether her reason was yielding under the strain, she muttered, scarcely audibly—

"This was it! This was the secret! Then, Countess Hohenwalden had good reason for saying that I am unworthy to be her son's wife. Oh, Conrad—my Conrad—must I lose you?"

In her woe she made feeble movements with her hands, and pressed them for a moment to her head, and then waved them without purpose in the air, and stood up, aimlessly, and fell back into a chair.

Harriet Brandon leant over her in wild alarm, and held her, and watched her, and caressed her, and, again and again, she put

to herself the question, "Will her brain endure it?"

Suddenly Claire turned to her aunt with an automatic movement, and said, as if she were dreaming aloud, "Well . . . the rest?"

"The rest? . . . my darling. Then, after the trial, I brought you away from England, so that you might not meet English people . . . who knew. I did it in the foolish hope of preventing you from ever hearing it. Indeed, indeed, I did it for the best. And that is why we have lived abroad, and why I did not want to go back to England. Oh, I did believe that I could hide it from you, and that you might be spared this awful knowledge."

"Aunt . . . aunt . . . " said Claire, lifting up her lifeless eyes, and endeavouring vainly to hold them open steadily, "if I had known it sooner, I could have hidden myself . . . I should not have known Conrad. . . . Now . . . now . . . I have only known him to . . . to . . . oh, my heart!"

"Yes, yes, sweet darling. I see it now. I see that it would have been better to have told you. But, indeed, indeed, I acted for the best. The aim, the purpose, the duty of my life—as I

saw it—was to hide the secret from you. I thought it could be hidden—always. Love blinded me to realities. I should have told you in Venice—in London—when opportunities came—long ago. But I did not dare.”

“And now, aunt? Now?”

“Forgive me—oh, forgive me!”

And with bursting sobs, with ungovernable sighs and tears, in aching overwhelming distress, Harriet Brandon cast herself down and hid her despairing face upon Claire’s knees.

Claire’s fingers played mechanically with Harriet Brandon’s hair. For a while she was unconscious that her aunt, maddened by grief, was humbled there before her. Suddenly, she perceived her. She grasped her with returning excitement, and lifted her, and cried, in fever, almost shouting, “Forgive you? Forgive you? Why? Why? I love you. You are my aunt, my Tante. How can you talk of my forgiveness? But . . . I am beginning to understand, more clearly. Do you know that . . . everything is gone from me? Gone! Do you know that . . . I cannot be . . . the wife of Conrad?”

“Why not? He does not care for birth.”

“He?” cried Claire, trying to stand up once more, and, in her passion, unknowingly pushing her aunt away from her. “He? Whatever be his love for me—and I know, too well, how vast it is—*I . . . I . . .* aunt . . . will never be his wife, with this stain upon my name. I told his mother my birth was honourable. . . . How could I doubt that it was? . . . *And it was not!* . . . But, why was the marriage not proved? They *were* married . . . I suppose? . . . or, am I . . . really . . . really . . . no, I cannot say the word. Oh, aunt, aunt! why was it not proved?”

“We sought everywhere, darling. We followed all the clues. We sought for years. But we could discover nothing. Yes, certainly, positively, they were married. Your father told me so. You shall see his letter. And George . . . wicked George . . . the cause of all this . . . do you comprehend now, Claire, why I hate him? . . . has written to me this very morning to say that he repents, and that he wants to undo his work and to recognise your rights. But, whatever he may do, he cannot efface the verdict of the jury.”

"That was the trial Mrs Gordon spoke about?"

"Yes, dearest."

"When you behaved so well! And at that trial I was judged to be . . . the marriage of my father and mother was declared to be . . . what?"

"Not proved."

"And then we came abroad?"

"Yes."

"I cannot think. But it seems to me that things that were obscure are becoming clearer. Dear Tatte, when shall we leave Ems? I cannot stop here now. I will see Conrad, and . . . will tell him . . . and will say . . . farewell . . . to him. Oh, Conrad, Conrad!"

She wrung her hands in the infinity of her affliction. She repeated, "Oh, Conrad, Conrad!" And she went on, "Can we go away to-day? After Conrad, my one thought is to hide myself."

"Claire," said Harriet Brandon, with deep solemnity, "my life has passed, until to-day, in struggling to conceal this fearful secret from you. You have heard it. You have lived through it. Henceforth, the one object

of my existence will be to lessen—if that be possible—the consequences of the revelation. I will give orders to prepare immediately for our departure.”

Then Claire, with uncertain steps, walked, wanderingly, about the room, and called upon her will to stand by her, and prayed for strength.

After a while she stopped before her aunt, who was following her with febrile solicitude, and said, almost quietly, “Will you send to Conrad . . . to ask him to come here? I must speak to him at once. I shall break down if I delay. What I have to say . . . must be said . . . while I still possess the force to say it. My head is very weak. And, aunt, I entreat of you, hurry on our departure. I long to be away—anywhere—provided it is elsewhere.”

A few minutes afterwards Conrad Hohenwalden came.

Harriet Brandon pressed Claire once more in her arms, and left the room.

The appearance of Claire filled Conrad with instant, startling fear. The ashy pallor of her cheeks, the hopeless exhaustion of her eyes,

the forlorn despondency of her mouth, the helpless dropping of her arms, the desperate prostration of her whole person, proclaimed to him that she had received some disastrous blow.

She looked at him, brokenly, with those despairing eyes. The utter desolation of her gaze appalled him.

“But . . . Claire! . . . Claire!” he cried. “What is it? I thought . . . I fancied . . . that you wished to see me about my conversation with your aunt last night. I came to ask you to agree with me in telling her that we implore her consent to our immediate marriage. And . . . What is this? . . . What has happened?”

“Conrad,” answered Claire, in a voice he did not recognise—an underbreath, unnatural, unreal, almost unearthly—“Conrad . . . my heart is crushed. . . . Let me hold your hand . . . once more . . . while I speak.”

Pale like herself, in stupor and in terror, he strained his eyes upon her, and stooped over her in riveted attention.

“Your mother told me . . . that . . . that I am unworthy to be your wife. Your mother

. . . spoke the truth. I am unworthy. The name . . . I bear . . . does not . . . belong to me. I learnt . . . just now . . . that my father . . . was . . . not . . . married."

Wildly, as if a ball had gone through his heart, Conrad leaped away. His arms waved frantically. Breathless, aghast, he stood, not comprehending, but feeling that something inconceivable had happened.

"Your father . . . was . . . not . . . married!" he echoed, not hearing himself speak.

For some seconds it seemed to him that there was no longer a world around him, that neither he nor Claire existed, that all was dissolved, that there was an end, a break, a disappearance. Vaguely he was conscious of universal ruin. Everything was swept away—especially his own identity. There was no form left, no fact, no truth, no light, no life. The impossible alone survived. There was darkness.

Then dashed in furious reaction. He rushed back to Claire, grasped her hands, and pulled at them, as if to drag her from a precipice, and called to her, almost in a shout, "Well . . . then . . . your father was not married . . . then . . . then . . . Claire?"

"There is no proof," she went on, in a voice stifled by convulsive spasms, "... there is no proof. It appears it has been ... so declared ... in a judgment ... by a court of law. Therefore ... it is my duty ... that is to say ... I have asked you ... to come to me ..."

Conrad stamped with fierce impatience. The shock, instead of checking him, had, if possible, increased his passion. He longed to snatch her to him, to lift her in his arms, to bear her off, to soothe, to lull, to love her. And yet, he listened on.

"To come to me ... I say ... once more ... before I lose speech, strength, and will ... I feel that all is ebbing from me ... to let me tell you ... my own self ... with so much love ... oh, with so much love, my Conrad ... that ... that ... I cannot be ... your wife ... and ... that ..."

Conrad broke madly into a hoarse cry. "You cannot be my wife? ... You *shall* be my wife!" he shouted, in raging desperation. "No force on earth will stop me. I claim you. I demand you. I call for you. You are mine. It is no more in your power to

withdraw from me than it is in mine to shrink back from you. Your name! . . . your name! . . . What care I for a name? My name is yours. That, at all events, will belong to you." And then, exhausted, his voice sank down almost to a whisper, and he said, "But, Claire . . . Claire . . . what is it? . . . what is it? It cannot be my mother who said this? . . . who told you?"

"My aunt . . . she knew."

"But . . . what does it mean? . . . Your father was not married? . . . Why were you left in ignorance? . . . What will my mother say? . . . She has not heard it yet?"

"My aunt told me just now . . . She wished that I should never know. . . . She hoped to hide it from me. . . . But, Conrad, our love has come. . . . She could not give me to you . . . without telling me. And . . . she has told me. . . . Oh, Conrad, how I love you! . . . I could have been your fond companion. . . . The dream is gone. . . ."

Her voice fell to a hushed sigh. Faintly, feebly, solemnly, he heard her pronounce again the whispered syllables, "The dream is gone."

Her head drooped down. She breathed noiselessly. In all else, her life seemed to have gone out of her with those words.

Conrad gazed at her, in a frenzy of mingled grief and incredulity.

The light brightness which was so essentially her distinguishing characteristic, had disappeared, as if she had never possessed it. Her whole self was shattered, vanquished, crushed out beneath the blow that had struck her.

Her eyes were almost closed; lustre was gone from them; they spoke no language; they revealed no thought; the play of life was no longer in them; they sank passively, in helpless unmeaningness.

Her mouth told, on the contrary, with cruel clearness, the silent story of despair. Her parted lips were blanched, with faint patches of dull violet; they were cramped, shrivelled, shrunk; they did not fall, and yet they did not seem to be held up; there was an anguish in their sickly drooping, a resignation in their sinking purposelessness, a withering of all will in their nerveless atony, which cast upon them a woe so appallingly intense that Conrad

wrung his hands as he looked, in the rending poignancy of his distress.

Her wan cheeks were hollow ; her very hair had lost its wavy grace ; her arms were strengthless.

But more than all—with even greater significance than her mouth—her hands revealed her agony to Conrad. Those hands had been to him a study of delight ; they had explained Claire to him with a vividness, a legibleness, a precision that nothing else in her all-speaking person had surpassed. He knew their rapid, mobile gesture ; he knew the sparkling descriptiveness of their action ; he had watched them in their thousand meanings ; he had marked their suggestive oratory ; he had gazed, with the thrilling admiration of love, at their delicate vivacity, at their supple elegance, at their blue-veined, transparent whiteness, at their rosy opalescences. And there they lay before him, uncoloured, cold, obscure, as if they were not hers, the palms turned upwards, the fingers dropping listlessly—but yet, in a vague way, contracted—their sprightly movement stilled, their bright talk silent, their life departed. All was weakness, downfall, desolation.

“Great God!” he gasped.

Slowly, with a long painful effort, Claire raised her eyes.

She fixed them, in mournful tenderness, upon him.

He seized her hands again, and held them, and cried, with a renewed outburst of violent agitation, “What does it mean? . . . Claire . . . tell me. . . . Say that it is all untrue . . . all a mad error. . . . You cannot turn from me. . . . You are mine, I tell you . . . mine . . . in sorrow and in joy . . . mine . . . mine . . . I will not yield you.”

Then she spoke, with difficulty, wearily, “Conrad, we have learnt love together. Conrad, I am yours . . . for always . . . for evermore. But . . . a shame was on me . . . and I did not know it. . . . When I let myself love . . . I believed I had a right to love . . . I told your mother so. . . . But now . . . now . . . I have learnt it. . . . My shame . . . not you . . . will be the companion of my life. . . . No, no . . . it cannot be . . . it must not be. . . . We part . . . to meet no more. My Conrad . . . in my heart . . . deep down . . . one with my pulse, one with my being, one with

my soul . . . is the undying thought of you . . . is the unmeasurable immensity of a love that had opened light to my unknowing vision . . . of a love . . . oh, Conrad . . . that will make the night of my distress still blacker, still more dreary, still more fearful in its loneliness."

After a silence, she added, "We leave Ems to-day."

"But . . . it is not true," exclaimed Conrad. "It cannot, it shall not be true. If you leave, I go with you."

Claire shook her head.

"I tell you I will never cease to follow you. In this inconceivable horror, in this incomprehensible misery, one idea alone is clear to me. You shall be my wife. Where is your aunt? I must speak to her at once."

"Yes," whispered Claire. "Speak to her. Try to understand. I understand nothing—only that it is so. . . . Before we start . . . I will say farewell to you . . . Oh, to have to say farewell! . . . Conrad, have I . . . have I . . . deserved it? What have I done?"

"A thousand times I tell you," declared Conrad, violently, "it shall not be. You have

no power of decision. You are mine—as I am yours.”

“It has to be,” sighed Claire.

And then the door opened, slowly, hesitatingly, and Harriet Brandon, pale and faltering, came in.

“Explain this, I entreat you,” cried Conrad, hastening to her. “She says she will not be my wife.”

“Darling, darling,” groaned Harriet Brandon, stooping over Claire, and leaving Conrad answerless. “Darling, how are you?” And she turned to Conrad and asked, feverishly—“How has she borne it?”

Claire tried to look at her, and murmured—“When do we leave? I must go; I must go.”

“Then I go with you,” exclaimed Conrad.

Claire made a feeble movement of the hand, to signify refusal.

They stood and looked at her, in the deepness of grief.

After a while, wanderingly, unconsciously, as if murmuring in a dream, yet with a mournfulness so piteously plaintive that tears flowed silently from the others as they watched her,

Claire moaned out—"I learnt to love. . . . But it was for no end. . . . I felt sunshine in my heart. . . . But it has turned to black cloud. . . . I had a bright vision . . . so bright . . . so bright. . . . I heard sweet music. . . . But the vision has vanished . . . the harmony is silenced. . . . Night has come down at noon-day. . . . There is darkness everywhere. . . . All is gloom . . . gloom. . . . I can discern nothing in the sombre mist . . . yet . . . yet, the memory will endure. . . . The mark of the past joy is ineffaceable. . . . For ever it will dwell with me. . . . Alas! . . . Alas! . . . Alas!"

Then she was still. It seemed as if her spirit had travelled far away.

Harriet Brandon clasped her hands. She asked Conrad in a low voice, anxiously, "Is she delirious? How can she travel? She is too ill. And where could we go? Had she not better stop here?"

"No, no," was the whispered answer. "At any hazard she must be taken away from Ems. Go to Wiesbaden. It is near. It is very quiet. She will be alone. Take her there. And go to-day. I will follow you to-morrow."

After a hesitation, he added, heavily, "First of all, I must settle this with my mother."

Then Claire began to rally from her stupor. She pressed her hands to her head, and rocked herself slowly in her chair.

Presently she raised her eyes and looked. She even made an effort to smile; but no smile would come. She tried to stretch her hand to her aunt, and sighed out—"Come . . . close to me. Let me lean my head upon you . . . dearest . . . my all."

At those words a light burst over Harriet Brandon's face. She felt herself forgiven. Her terror of Claire's judgment on her dissolved away. She knew a sudden peace that had been absent from her heart for years. Whatever else might happen there would, at all events, be no change between herself and Claire. Those words vouched for it. She opened her arms. She rushed to Claire—almost in gladness. She flung herself upon her. In her emotion she forgot Claire's state. She had, for the instant, no thought, no sight, no sense, but the consciousness of pardon. She was one again with Claire; one once more for

always ; one as love alone could unite them ; one as trust alone could bind them.

Two hours later they had left Ems. They said good-bye to no one.

Claire was half unconscious. She had tacitly admitted that she would see Conrad again. Their farewell was postponed. She had become powerless to think. The effects of the blow were more and more gravely marked as the moments passed. Physically, she was inert. Her eyes were almost always closed. Throughout the journey she never spoke, excepting once.

As the train passed along the Rhine bank she caught sight of the glistening river. She turned her head and gazed at it, at first with apathy and dull emptiness, as if she did not recognise it ; then, after a while, with a strange wild look of longing.

Her aunt, who was watching her intently, saw her lips part and caught the sound of words. They murmured, in the gently wandering numbed manner she had already shown, " Oh, if the Lorelei would drag me to the deep waters ! "

CHAPTER XX.

As soon as the Brandons had started, Conrad Hohenwalden went to his mother.

Since the violent explanation of the day before he had been several times to see her. Few words had been exchanged. No allusion had been made to the grave difficulty which had arisen between them.

On entering the room Conrad inquired how she was. Then he said, "I have to make to you, my dear mother, a further communication on the subject of my intention to marry Claire Brandon."

Countess Hohenwalden remained steadfastly calm. She appeared to be totally indifferent.

"I have already stated to you that it is my unchangeable purpose to make Claire Brandon my wife. Since I saw you this morning, something has happened which will prove to you, very strikingly, the force and the in-

flexibility of that purpose. I am deeply distressed to have to acquaint you with what has occurred ; but the information will, at all events, supply to you absolutely convincing proof that nothing will ever change my determination. Claire Brandon learnt this morning, from her aunt, that there is doubt about the marriage of her father and mother, and that . . .”

With all her self-command, with all her inflexible resolution, Countess Hohenwalden was unable to prevent herself from starting as she heard this ; a flash of astonishment passed across her eyes ; her lips and nostrils trembled. But the emotion—so far, at least, as its outward manifestation went—was over in a few seconds. She became rigidly impassible once more.

“ . . . And that,” continued Conrad, “ in default of proof, a court of law has decided against the reality of the marriage.”

“ Why, she declared to me that her birth was honourable !” exclaimed the Countess, with a sneer. And then she added, contemptively and contemptuously, “ The position is, really, very complete.”

“The effect of this revelation on Claire Brandon,” went on Conrad, with perfect coolness, “has been to make her declare that she will not accept me as her husband.”

At last the Countess was violently moved. She almost sprang up in her bed.

“Admirable girl!” she cried. “She refuses to marry you? Most admirable girl! What a perfect character! Where is she, that I may embrace her? If only that girl had been born, she would have been one of the most remarkable young women of our time. What a wife she would have made you! She is full of rare wisdom, and she does, indeed, prove it by declining to carry out your absurd idea. Send her to me at once that I may congratulate her.”

“She has quitted Ems,” answered Conrad, as tranquilly as if he were pursuing an ordinary conversation. “And as the improvement in your health permits me to leave you—at all events for a time—I shall follow her tomorrow. The news in no way affects me. Her present objection will not, of course, endure. I shall make her my wife, and I trust that, as I have just said, the maintenance of

that intention, under these new circumstances, will convince you that I shall never vary."

His mother did not think it necessary to look at him. The news put an end to the marriage, of course; and she was so comforted and so soothed by it that she permitted herself to yield a little to the sentiment of fatigue. She became quite quiet. But still she went on talking, gently and convincingly.

"The further communication, as you call it, which you have thought fit to make to me, changes absolutely nothing. Miss Brandon was unfit to be your wife. I told you so—and I told her so. It turns out that she was even more unfit than I supposed. But it is merely a question of degree. Nothing is altered in the situation — excepting that she herself now knows and recognises her unfitness. You disgrace yourself a little more by saying that you persist in your scheme, after she has abandoned it."

"You say truly, my mother," replied Conrad, "that nothing is changed. Now, as before; to-day, as yesterday. I *will* make her my wife. I ask you, once more, to consent to my marriage with her."

“And yet, what a pity!” exclaimed the Countess, taking no notice of his request, but becoming vehement again. “Such a girl! This last detail of her conduct is altogether superb. No other woman that I have known would have been capable of judging herself so intelligently. To refuse—of her free will, because she perceives that she is unworthy—to be the wife of a Hohenwalden! Magnificent! Quite magnificent! What a nature! It is really lamentable that she cannot be your wife.”

Her excitement was too much for her. She coughed violently.

Directly the fit was over she continued, in a rather mocking tone, “You say you mean to marry her all the same, and that her present objection will not endure. Permit me to assure you, my son, that you are mistaken there. I measure that girl more correctly than you do. She will not change her mind this time. If, as I infer from what you are good enough to tell me, this news has filled her with a proper appreciation of the unworthiness of her birth—not that, in reality, it changes the previous situation very much—if

she has, in consequence, run away from Ems ; if she has declared to you that, now, she will not marry you, all I can say is, that you may count on her carrying out her decision. It is really a great pity that I cannot tell her how much she pleases me, how earnestly I admire her, and how sincerely I regret that it is impossible for you to marry her. I repeat that if the poor girl had been born she would have done honour to our class. I should have very much liked to tell her so and to kiss her. I owe her a great deal. Well, thank God it is over. I hope, Conrad, that I shall hear no more about it, and that you will become my son once more. You know how I love you."

She held out her hand to him.

He took it. He raised it to his lips. But he replied, "It is precisely because I know how much you love me that I ask you, again, to consent to my marriage with Claire."

"Really, Conrad, if you go on like this, I shall begin to fear you are mad. The thing is ended, I tell you—ended, for ever. Miss Brandon has, most properly, refused you. It adds to my pain in all this that she should show so wise an appreciation of what it be-

comes her to do, and that you — you who ought to have set her an example — should have no sense whatever of your duty. I am accustomed, unfortunately, to your follies, but you have never perpetrated anything so outrageous as this. I speak of it, as you see, with unconcern, because now, thank God, no more can come of it. But if the danger still existed I should not talk to you in this way. I should order you, as I did before, to leave me, and I should cease to regard you as my son.”

“Then, mother, you refuse your consent to my marriage?”

“I have no answer to make to such a question, except to remind you of all that I have already said.”

“I can only hope,” said Conrad, “that you will change your mind, for Claire will be my wife as soon as we can complete the necessary formalities.”

“Under those circumstances,” answered his mother, with a sudden return of concentrated rage, “I decline to hold any further communication with you. You can quit Ems whenever it pleases you to do so.”

And, to emphasise her words, she moved round in her bed, so as to turn her back to him.

Conrad looked at her. Twice he made a movement as if to speak. But he said nothing, and quietly walked out of the room.

After a while he went moodily into the gardens, led by a vague need of sitting in a lonely corner and of trying to get his head clear. But solitude was not at his command. Before he had gone a hundred yards, he met Madame de Rochedure. She seized him, dragged him to a bench, and assailed him with a volley of impatient questions.

“What does all this mean? The Brandons have left for Wiesbaden? Everybody is talking about it. And they said good-bye to no one—not even to me. What has happened? It must be something grave. What is it?”

Conrad stared at her, helplessly. His thoughts were far away, and he needed to be left alone with them. They were full of bitter disquietude and distress, about Claire, about his mother, about himself. There was no space in them for outer things. He was utterly unprepared for the attacks of curiosity.

He had forgotten that curiosity existed. And here he was dragged back suddenly face to face with the little world of Ems, and told that he was expected to satisfy its inquisitiveness. In the intensity of his preoccupation it had never occurred to him that the unexplained departure of the Brandons would arouse suspicion.

His prolonged silence and the embarrassment of his manner convinced the Marquise that there was a secret in the air; so, with the impetuous indiscretion which was one of the peculiarities of her nature, she rushed on, "If you do not choose to answer me, Count, I will leave you to look at the flower-beds and to admire the skill with which they have been laid out. But I warn you that I will follow Claire to Wiesbaden. If she is in trouble, I will pour over her all the sympathy in my heart—and, when it is wanted, there is a great store of it. I can guess what has happened. It is no concern of mine . . . of course, of course. But, if anything has gone wrong between you and that noble girl . . . I . . . I . . ."

She stopped, tapped the ground with her

parasol, started up, and exclaimed, excitedly, "Good afternoon, Count."

Before he could add a word, her white dress, her silver-laced pale blue dolman, and her tulip-covered straw hat were flitting in the sunlight, yards away.

Conrad muttered to himself, "Yes, . . . I suppose I must expect this sort of thing. But I doubt whether I can stand it. If a man were to ask me a question, I should knock him down. I feel, distinctly, that it would be a deep satisfaction to me to maltreat somebody. But that would be very foolish. It would attract still more attention. A duel to-morrow morning might delay my arrival at Wiesbaden. The wisest course I can take is to go away. There is a train at eight o'clock."

He slept that night at Coblenz, and reached Wiesbaden at noon next day.

Harriet Brandon came to him directly she heard of his arrival at the hotel. She told him that Claire was ill, in bed; but that it was her intention to get up and to see him in the afternoon. She added that, as Claire's sole idea was to be alone, they would go down

to the Black Forest as soon as she could travel, and would try to find some solitary place there to stay in for a while.

To Conrad's anxious questions about the state of Claire, Harriet Brandon answered that there had been no change since they had left Ems. She had remained almost constantly silent. She looked very haggard. She was intensely affectionate with her aunt, and that was the sole point on which Harriet Brandon seemed to care to dwell.

When these first inquiries had been answered, Conrad asked her whether she would acquaint him with the details of Claire's history.

Not only did she make no objection, but she seemed almost to find satisfaction in being able, at last, to narrate the painful tale which she had hidden away so determinedly. She concluded it by showing Conrad the letter she had received the day before from her brother.

He listened with passionate interest.

"What a lamentable story of ill-fortune!" he exclaimed. "What a strange succession of mischances! The collateral evidence indicates conclusively that Colonel Brandon was

married ; yet all the channels of proof have dried up successively under your hand. Still, with the imperious motives which have now arisen for obtaining evidence, and with Mr George Brandon desirous to give help, we must begin again, at once."

Harriet Brandon shook her head. She pointed out that if researches made so carefully three years after the marriage had produced no result, it was scarcely to be expected that they would have any better effect when more than twenty years had passed.

"But it is impossible to accept defeat," persisted Conrad. "The consequences would be too grave. I cannot disguise from you that the absence of certainty would affect Claire's position in Austria. Society there—which is composed of people, many of whom are, directly or indirectly, related to me, and all of whom know me—attaches great importance to such matters ; not so much as my mother, but still, a great deal. There would be insurmountable difficulties at Court. I bestow no thought myself on questions of the kind ; I care for nothing but to possess Claire for my wife ; that is the sole desire of my heart.

But others would take other views. Claire would be exposed, if her father's marriage were not established, to slights from which I could not shield her, and which, probably, would render it impossible for us to live in Austria. We must recommence the search, Miss Brandon, and we must succeed. It is indispensable. What does Claire say herself?"

"I have not been able yet to tell her any of the details. She knows nothing, thus far, but the horrible fact itself. She has asked no questions. She has been incapable of listening. She is in an almost constant lethargy. I have been frightened by her aspect, and especially by her extraordinary impassibility. She seems so wounded that she cannot rally. You will see, presently. And yet, with all the consequences, it is indeed a relief to me to have confessed the truth at last."

"How you must have suffered," replied Conrad, "with such a hideous secret between you!"

It was not till five o'clock that Claire sent for Conrad. Until then he had to wait in impatience and anxiety.

He found her in a large arm-chair, half

lying down. He was infinitely shocked by her appearance; the first glance showed him that the Claire he had known had disappeared. The change in her was of a kind that illness does not produce. She did not bear the mark of the slow wearing away of malady; her prostration was not like that which follows long sickness; her pallor was not the sallow colourlessness of disease. Her condition presented characters of its own, such as he had not seen before, and which alarmed him all the more because of their strangeness. Every symptom in her proclaimed that her exhaustion was not corporeal but moral. In the whiteness of her skin there was no yellow mixed; on the contrary, it had a marked underground of purple. The lassitude of her attitude and her movements was broken intermittently by sudden starts and spasmodic quiverings, which showed that strength had not abandoned her. Across her eyes had passed, when Conrad entered, a momentary flash of such intensity of depth and meaning that, for a second, they had seemed full of ardent life. So far it was not her health that was affected; it was her soul that had given

way. So far, the damage done to her was spiritual, not physical. To Conrad, accustomed to the brilliant animation of her manner and her person, the collapse of her temperament appeared even more frightful than disease.

He sat down next to her, and gently took her hand.

Wistfully, wearily, painfully, she looked at him. After a while she said, "When first I dared to let my eyes meet yours—you remember, Conrad, at your mother's bedside, as we watched together—it was in the hope of the beginning. To-day I look again, in the sadness of the end."

"Claire, Claire, do not speak in that way," entreated Conrad. "We will marry at once, and all the hope of the beginning will be realised by our love."

"We are both right," answered Claire, feebly; "you, in persisting to wish to marry me; I, in rejecting your appeal. It is my duty to refuse to become your wife . . . and I will discharge that duty . . . whatever . . . it may cost me."

She sank back exhausted, and closed her eyes again.

Conrad let a minute pass in silence. He leaned over her and listened to her breathing, and held down his hot impatience. At last he could resist no longer. With earnest tenderness he whispered to her, "But, dearest, you have not heard the details yet. Your aunt has told them all to me. I know the situation, and you do not. There is not the slightest doubt about the marriage. As soon as you are acquainted with the facts you will recognise, as I do, that no doubt is possible."

With an effort, Claire asked, in a voice of worn despondency, "If doubt had not been possible, why did the jury decide against the marriage?"

"Oh! that," went on Conrad, excitedly, "was a mere matter of form—of technical evidence—of documents and certificates. The legal proof was not forthcoming at the moment, that is true; but the moral proof was complete. You will see that when all is told to you. There is nothing, absolutely nothing, in the case which justifies the hesitation you are manifesting. I claim you for my wife, Claire, according to your pledge."

Claire forced herself to reply, but it was

evident that her thoughts were not quite under her control, and that the strain of suffering was rapidly exhausting her. She said, brokenly and faintly, but yet with unmistakable resolution of purpose, "You speak, Conrad . . . as you ought to speak. . . . Your noble nature could admit no other feelings . . . employ no other words. . . . But, my position is not yours. . . . It is for me . . . for me alone . . . to insist on the sacrifice . . . which fate . . . imposes on us both. I do not . . . shrink . . . because it . . . will crush us . . . both together. . . . And yet . . . my Conrad . . . oh, my Conrad . . . if hesitation . . . were permissible . . . I should hesitate . . . *for you!* . . . I cannot hesitate. . . . I discovered . . . yesterday . . . that . . . I am unfit . . . to be your wife."

She opened her eyes to their full width, gazed passionately at him, flung her arms convulsively round his neck, dragged him to her, pressed her lips hysterically to his, and then fell backwards in the chair, moaning in anguish, almost inaudibly, "It is finished . . . farewell . . . may God have pity on

us! . . . I will never be your wife. . . .
Go . . . go . . . I implore you. Adieu
. . . for ever!"

Conrad started up. It seemed to him that she had fainted. He ran for Harriet Brandon. Directly she saw Claire, she whispered to him, "Leave her . . . leave her. . . . I will see. . . . Tell Berthe to come—directly."

Conrad went out and wandered in the park. The situation was beginning to frighten him. The two persons for whom he cared most—his mother and Claire—were no longer in union with him. He had almost quarrelled with his mother, and Claire had decided evidently to break off the marriage. Of course, he took it for granted that she would give way. It was impossible for him to admit that she could continue to refuse to be his wife. But for the moment the difficulty seemed real; especially as, in the condition into which she had fallen, he could not argue with her, and implore her, and convince her. He could only wait; and waiting under such circumstances was very cruel. His one thought was to go back to Claire, and to look at her, if

he could not speak to her ; but even that was impossible so long as she remained ill. In his desperation he strode out into the country, and did not return to Wiesbaden, after a long walk, till night was settling down.

On reaching the hotel he went up to inquire about Claire, and learnt that she was extremely weak, and had been obliged to go to bed again. The evening passed wearily ; he mounted the stairs every half-hour to ask for news ; but there was none to give him ; he was told simply that the condition was unchanged.

So it was again the next day. Claire remained in the same impassive state—silent, wishless, motionless. If her aunt questioned her, she answered gently ; but of her own accord she never spoke.

On the third day Harriet Brandon told Conrad she was growing uneasy, that this prolonged prostration was beginning to look unnatural. Claire, too, had complained of feeling chilled, and had asked to be covered warmly. Her hands were cold, with sudden rushes of heat, and her pulse had quickened.

Conrad was not surprised to hear all this.

On the contrary, it was to be expected, he said, that Claire's health would give way somewhat under the pressure she was enduring. He did not think there was any cause for apprehension ; but still he advised Harriet Brandon to consult a doctor.

The doctor came, asked questions, said there was a little fever, that calm was needed, and that he would examine her again later in the day.

But the second visit produced no more result than the first.

Conrad dined miserably. He was more anxious than he liked to own to himself. He had questioned the doctor as he came down from Claire's room, and had not liked his uncertain answers.

His dinner was nearly finished when he heard behind him an airy rustle and a light and rapid footstep. He turned his head, and there was Madame de Rochedure holding out her hand to him.

"Count," she exclaimed, excitedly, "I did you wrong the last time I saw you at Ems. I suspected you of . . . I do not know what . . . of something you had not done. I see

that now. As I am honest, I need to tell you so. My cure is finished; I have nothing to do; so, as I am deeply interested in Claire, I have followed her here. I have seen her; she is ill, really ill. Her aunt has given me to understand there has been some moral shock; but I suspected that already. What I want to know is the cause of the shock. Can you tell me?"

"No, Marquise, I cannot tell you," answered Conrad. "Indeed I may say that nobody can tell you, save Miss Claire Brandon herself. The secret is hers alone. I know it—for she has told me—but I cannot repeat it. Permit me to beg you, therefore, not to insist."

Madame de Rochedure looked at him, saw that he was in earnest, and turned away, saying, "When you have finished your dinner, come and sit at my table. I want to talk to you."

Conrad had rather have been left alone. But he could not escape, and he joined Madame de Rochedure a few minutes afterwards, with as much good grace as he could assume.

She rushed immediately into the centre of the subject.

“Directly I heard that you too had left for Wiesbaden, I understood, of course, that Claire’s sudden departure was not caused, as I had suspected at first, by any difficulty with you. It was a relief to me to feel that; for, with such a character as hers, a disappointment in love would be very grave. Yet, what has happened—whatever it be—must be decidedly serious, for Claire looks horribly ill. She knew me when I went to her just now; but she had to make an effort to recognise me. It is her head that has gone wrong. And her head was the strongest part of her. I am horribly grieved. What do you think about her?”

“I think she is ill. I fear she may become worse. But I have no opinion as to what may be the matter with her. Nor do I imagine the doctor has either.”

“Of course this upsets all your plans. You cannot fix the date of the marriage until she is well again.”

“No,” echoed Conrad, disheartenedly.

“I do hope I can be useful to her. I have come here for that. I am sure I could learn to help in a sick-room; all women can, when

they try. I am so interested in Claire. She has given me a totally new idea of what a woman may be. I have perceived her superiority ever since my first talk with her at Ems. She has done good to me already. Hitherto, I have regarded every marriage as a predestined failure; but really I am beginning to admit that you two may perhaps be happy together."

As Conrad's thoughts were intensely concentrated on the grave anxieties which surrounded him, this prattle, well-intentioned though it was, tired him and even irritated him. He had to make an effort to listen. He answered, however, courteously, "I am glad that you appreciate her."

"And now," continued Madame de Rochedure, "I must tell you what it is I want to speak to you about. If I am to be of any use to Claire while she remains ill—and I do wish most heartily to be of use—I ought to be acquainted with the causes of her sudden departure from Ems, and of the strange condition into which she has fallen. You said just now that there is 'a secret.' I hate that word, because it has no sense at all; it may

mean anything or nothing, a horror or a trifle. Claire is not a person to be made so ill by a trifle, and it is impossible for me to suppose that it is a horror. What is it, Count?"

"Madame," answered Conrad, "I can only repeat that it is impossible for me to inform you."

"Then I must see," observed the Marquise, "whether Miss Harriet Brandon will be more communicative."

Conrad bowed slightly. He made no reply.

"You see," went on the Marquise, "in my position here I could not support the contact of such a secret. It would destroy my whole power of service. I do not say this because I have any indiscreet desire to thrust myself into Claire's affairs. This is not a time or a case for what is usually called curiosity. It is because the secret is the operating cause; because, from the effects it has produced, it must necessarily be grave; because, to work with you in our common object of soothing Claire, I need to know it. The means to be employed to bring Claire back to her ordinary health can only be selected after taking precise account of the nature of the harm which is

weighing her down. That is self-evident. I long to do for Claire what she did for your mother. I should be delighted to nurse her. There is something in her which forces me to run after her. I say again, that is why I came here. But I must know what is the matter with her. Otherwise I can do no good. What has happened to her is so incomprehensible, that, if I am not told what it is, I shall spend my time at her bedside in guessing instead of nursing."

Conrad bowed silently again.

Then Madame de Rochedure got up, saying, "Well, we need say no more this evening. Good night. I will go and try to cheer Miss Harriet Brandon."

Next morning Claire was worse.

The doctor said, "I cannot give a precise name, as yet, to her condition. But it is my duty to warn you that it has become threatening. The signs are bad. A moral shock, such as you tell me this young lady has had to support, acts frequently on the head; but I do not perceive the habitual symptoms of inflammation of the brain. I incline to the impression that we have to deal rather with typhoid

fever, although that form of disease is seldom generated in so short a time, or even by purely moral causes. You informed me yesterday that she has been nursing in a sick-room. It is not impossible that the germ of this attack may have entered into her there."

Harriet Brandon shivered, joined her hands, and murmured, "God help us!"

Directly the doctor was gone, she sat down mechanically at her table and wrote two letters. Her terror and her excitement were so intense that she needed an immediate outlet for them in some direction.

The first letter was to Madame d'Hérystal. It said—

"In infinite affliction I send you word that Claire is terribly ill.

"The doctor talks of typhoid fever.

"I have been forced to tell her all—at last ; for she was engaged to be married to Conrad Hohenwalden.

"The instant she knew, she broke off the marriage.

"It is killing her.

"Can you and your brother come?"

The second letter was to George Brandon. It was in these words :—

“I received a few days ago your proposal about my niece.

“At that very moment it had become my cruel duty to inform her of her history, which I had hidden from her with unceasing care.

“The reason which forced me to tell her was, that she had given her love and was about to be married.

“As soon as she knew the truth, she broke off the marriage.

“The result is, that she has fallen most gravely ill and that her life is in danger.

“You see your work has been even more complete than you imagined.”

With a sentiment of relief she closed the letters and sent them to the post. Then she went back to Claire's bedside, where Madame de Rochedure was watching.

Claire was scarcely sensible. The torpor into which she had fallen had become almost unceasing. Her breath was short and feeble. The veins on her temples were swollen and

throbbed perceptibly. Her lips were dark. Her half-closed eyes were fixed and still. Her hands lay motionless before her.

Madame de Rochedure looked up. Her expression was anxious, almost frightened. She was not accustomed to such sights, and the spectacle she was contemplating had produced a deep effect upon her. Claire's personality had been so vivid, so sunny, so living, the change from radiant grace to shattered helplessness was so violent, that the eager nature of the Marquise was profoundly affected. She rose; she pointed silently to Claire; the corners of her mouth trembled; her eyes filled with tears. She seized Harriet Brandon's hands and whispered, in a sob, "Oh, my friend, it is frightful!"

Madame de Rochedure had undertaken to keep Conrad informed of the state of Claire. Her reports were so gloomy that they filled him with constantly growing apprehension. He wandered about in sickening alarm, went to meet the doctor as he came to each of his visits, and then waited for him at the bottom of the stairs to hear his report.

During the night delirium began to show

itself, and when the doctor arrived next morning, he said there was no further room for doubt, and that, notwithstanding the exceptional rapidity with which the attack had come on, it was typhoid of an unmistakable character.

Madame de Rochedure had taken up the nursing with restless zeal, but with a tenderness which quieted her movements. She was entirely unskilled and ignorant, and she could not keep awake, but her intentions were so excellent that she was a little hurt when Harriet Brandon told her that, as all of them, including Berthe, were technically incapable, she had decided to send for a professional nurse.

In the afternoon a telegram arrived from Madame d'Héristal announcing that she and M. de Morvan would start that evening for Wiesbaden.

As the sun went down the delirium increased, and Madame de Rochedure soon learnt the secret from the unconscious lips of Claire herself. It was not easy to follow her soft ravings, especially as she mixed up languages, speaking sometimes three or four almost to-

gether, in the same sentence; but still her broken, disconnected words were poured out so unceasingly and were so frequently repeated, that they told the entire story of her grief.

In anguish they hung over her and listened, with the strange mixture of respect and dread which delirium usually provokes in those who hear it for the first time.

“Conrad,” she murmured, “why are you not here? . . . Where is your hand? . . . Come. . . . There was no marriage . . . but we love each other. . . . Oh, so dearly! . . . The judge said they were not married . . . so I was not my father’s child. . . . I said farewell to you . . . for ever . . . because . . . I could not be your wife, as I had no father. . . . Your mother said so . . . and my father and mother said so, too. . . . But I love you, Conrad . . . you know I do . . . although we cannot be married. . . . It is like my father and mother . . . we cannot be married. . . . Adieu . . . Conrad!

Madame de Rochedure trembled with horror. In the silence of the sick-room, with scarcely any light, a feeble voice murmured dreamily this awful tale. The revelation broke her

down. It filled her with a feeling so intense, with such distress, such sympathy, such pity, that it seemed to her at first that she could not hold herself together under the pressure of such sensations. A question arose within her and seemed to fill the air around her, "Can Claire live through it?"

The night was bad. The march of the disease was strangely rapid. The dried lips began to blacken; the nails turned purple; the fingers caught feebly at the air, as if endeavouring to seize floating objects; the breathing was a low, jarring moan; the exhaustion was so complete that the delirium ceased to be audible.

Other doctors were called in. A consultation was held.

All that could be said was, "It is very grave. We can only hope for the best."

Madame de Rochedure went frequently to Conrad, but she seldom spoke to him. She only took his hand and looked at him. Harriet Brandon, too, left Claire's pillow sometimes for a moment to sob at his side.

In the middle of the day Madame d'Héristal and M. de Morvan arrived. Conrad met them at the station, and gave them details.

On entering the room and seeing Claire, Madame d'Hérystal was so affected that, for the moment, she was unable to remain. It seemed to her that the end was close.

She spoke immediately to her brother, to Madame de Rochedure, and to Conrad, of the necessity of administering the last Sacraments to Claire. They all agreed that, as Harriet Brandon, a Protestant, would probably not think of such a question, it was for them to mention it to her. Madame d'Hérystal undertook the mission. Harriet Brandon sobbed assent, but asked that the opinion of the doctors should be taken before sending for a priest.

At the consultation in the afternoon it was considered that, serious as was the state of Claire, it did not necessitate instant decision on the subject.

This declaration made them all hope again.

For two more days Claire lay almost senseless; no change occurred in her condition; her body burned with heat; cold washing did not reduce the temperature.

At last the doctors stated that the struggle seemed to be approaching its termination, and

that the time had come to call in the aid of religion.

In broken grief, in crushed despair, they listened, all together, to the judgment.

Conrad bowed down his head and clenched his hands.

Then, with a cruel effort, he said, in a low voice, "I will fetch the priest."

When Berthe heard that it was decided, she exclaimed to Madame d'Hérystal, "Oh, madame, madame, she may be saved by it, she may be saved by it! Above the doctors there is God. In our village several persons have been brought back to life by the last Sacraments. Oh, I will pray so hard!"

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.

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